

Unsung Hero

Harry Potter was a rather lonely soon-to-be-seventh-year. Since he could recall, he'd had it rough. From the tender age of one, fate and destiny had burdened young Harry with many of life's injustices. The most lamentable injustice would be known as Daniel Potter.

Daniel was Harry's twin brother and was hailed as the Boy-Who-Lived by the wizarding world. Being slightly better than an above average wizard, Daniel Potter was also Gryffindor's, Hogwarts', and Dumbledore's golden boy. It was as if sunshine blew out his arse.

And if that wasn't enough, there were Harry's parents. One would think two wonderful people such as Lily and James Potter, would never let the fame of one son overshadow the other, but unfortunately they did. It was Daniel Potter who was the apple of his parents' eye.

Harry didn't blame them most days, after all his parents had barely been grownups before they married and had him and his brother. Other days though, that didn't stop him from feeling overwhelming bitterness and resentment, despite having accepted the facts that were his life.

Those being:

1. Everybody loved and adored Daniel Potter.
2. Nobody loved or noticed Harry Potter.

It was especially hard on Harry when his brother got credit for the things Harry had done. For example, in first year when he had fought with Professor Quirrell for the Sorcerer's Stone or the amazing defeat of a eighty foot basilisk in second year. It didn't stop there. The recapture of Peter Pettigrew in third and figuring out Professor Moody was being impersonated in year four were attributed to Daniel Potter as well.

What was worse, and perhaps most unforgivable of all was Daniel never saying otherwise. He never dissuaded anyone of their notions and lorded it over Harry in private. What could Harry do about it?

Well, one thing was for sure, Harry was doing something about it. At the end of every school year, Harry would sneak into the Restricted Section of the Hogwarts' school library and steal a few books for summer reading. Having done this since first year, Harry was quite knowledgeable about many things which he shouldn't be. Things that would make Hermione Granger, Ravenclaw's queen know-it-all, green with envy if he were to ever flaunt it.

As Ravenclaw's unofficial king know-it-all, Harry was at the top of his classes and his year, not that his mum and dad noticed. He was a decent Quidditch player too. A seeker to be exact and had in fact never missed the snitch when he got a chance to play.

However, nobody ever slapped him on the back in congratulations at the end of the match or came up to discuss with him to discuss the amazing Wronski Feint he'd performed. But seeing as he wasn't a drop-dead gorgeous Chinese girl or his brother, who played the most scoring chaser in the history of the school, Harry wasn't sure he blamed them. Who would care about the twin who only sometimes played?

That would change this year, though, now that he wasn't playing second string to Cho Chang. If he wasn't back up maybe they would notice him. They might even like him if Ravenclaw won the Quidditch Cup this year.

In all his years at Hogwarts, Harry had never made a friend. He'd tried in the beginning, but they would lose interest after seeing that he was the twin with the lightning bolt scar, not the twin with the 'S' shaped scar on his head. It had hurt, Harry wouldn't deny that. He had thought that at least one person would want to be his friend at Hogwarts, but not even Hagrid, the most tenderhearted man in the world would give him the time of day if he said hello.

Sometimes, Harry wondered if he was invisible. When he got into that particular funk, Professor Snape would quickly disabuse him of that sentiment by giving him detention for something his brother did or a passing Slytherin had done. In first and second year, Harry had tried to get out of the unfair punishments but to no avail.

Nobody believed Harry Potter's side of things so he stopped trying to explain it.

When attention, however unlikely, was drawn his way the gossip mill would run around saying it was because he was trying to steal his brother's glory. Eventually, Harry had grown numb to the treatment he received for one thing or another and had learned to keep doing his own thing regardless of public opinion.

Fifth year had seen Daniel as the perfect Prefect, though he'd probably been the most undeserving candidate. Professor Flitwick, Ravenclaw's head of house, had calmly explained to Harry that he couldn't be one himself was because nobody at the school knew him and to give authority to an unknown would just be asking for trouble. After that particular conversation, Harry had blown a lot of shit up in private. Surprisingly, Peeves had been blamed and no repercussions had come his way.

A month ago had seen the Potter twins turn seventeen and become legal adult wizards. Except they still couldn't drink firewhiskey. Only Harry had taken advantage of the change in their station and gone to acquire an Apparition, Side-Along Apparition, Portkey Creation/Removal, and Spell Creation license from the Ministry of Magic. While he was at it, Harry had also gone and bought a Floo Network Express Lane Pass. He'd paid for the licenses and the pass with the pocket money he'd been able to scrounge up for the last few years. His parents never gave him any galleons of his own.

He'd never have to deal with another situation like what happened at the end of year four. Never again would he have to resort to hitchhiking to get to one place or another with his two Apparition licenses. And as an extra precaution, he had prepaid his Floo Pass should the need arise. It was the only license he would have to renew.

Harry had even had a chance to talk to some Aurors about getting into the Auror Program. To be fair maybe Daniel had forgotten about such things because he'd been under a mound of birthday presents, assaulted by tons of owls bearing gifts, and surrounded by a few dozen of the well-wishers at his annual birthday bash.

Two days ago, Daniel and Harry's Hogwarts letters had come in the mail. Daniel had gotten the Headboy badge, just like Harry knew he would, and Lily had gotten all weepy. James had been immeasurably proud and had immediately called his Uncles Sirius and Remus to share the glorious news. Daniel was without a doubt their favorite 'nephew,' though Harry doubted they knew that they had a second one.

As a reward for being Headboy, Daniel had gotten a new state of the art broomstick. A shiny red Firebolt 4003, purchased together by both James and Sirius so that they could afford it. Harry would have liked a new broom himself. He had gotten twelve O.W.L.S. to Daniel's six, and hoped it would be enough of a reason for his mum and dad to sit up and take notice. But alas he was still playing on one of the school's Cleansweep 7s and not one measly, "Good job, son," had ever been sent his way.

Ronald Weasley, Daniel's best mate came over later that day and the two boys had gone outside onto the Potter's Quidditch pitch to try the broom out. Inside, the afternoon had been passed with the male adults exaggerating all of Daniel's old games. Harry was sure that every spectacular throw, catch, pass, and score had been remarked upon once, if not twice.

While the adults were downstairs discussing Daniel's chances at making Professional Quidditch and playing for a League, Harry was upstairs in his small bedroom reading in the bay window. From his spot on the second floor of the Potter residence, Harry could see his brother and friend zipping across the pitch like lightning on the new broom.

Sighing mournfully that such a glorious broom would ever be wasted on his brother, Harry glanced around his room and was reminded of just how little he owned.

Everything he had was a secondhand castoff from his twin brother, including his tad too short robes and slightly off prescription spectacles. His school trunk was battered and had seen one too many *repauros*. Covering his walls were old torn Quidditch posters

that his brother hadn't wanted anymore and his shelves were filled with a few broken childhood toys that had seen better days.

Even his wand was a hand-me-down of Daniel's. It had been purchased from Mr. Ollivander when he and Daniel were two years old. The day Daniel turned eleven, James and Lily had brought it out and said it was a very special wand for a very special eleven year old. Unfortunately, it didn't work well in his twin brother's hands and they had reluctantly given it to Harry when he showed an aptitude with the eleven inch holly and phoenix feather wand.

Harry also had an owl that had been Daniel's in much the same way as his wand had been. The owl was his only because of Daniel refused to own an ordinary bird when he wanted an extraordinary one of a kind bird, not unlike Dumbledore's phoenix. It was no surprise to Harry to see that Daniel never got that phoenix he had wanted so badly.

Hedwig, Daniel's ex-owl, was a snowy white beauty who was more than just a mail carrier or a pet to Harry; she was his best friend and something of a mother hen. She would on many memorable occasions bring him dead mice when she thought he looked too thin. She was also the only guiding figure in his life. She would be the one to praise him for his accomplishments and the one to scold him when he was being bad. Without her, Harry knew he'd be lost.

Wrinkling his brow Harry peeked up over his textbook to see his brother flying. He focused as he slowly molded and pushed his magic to do what he wanted and got to watch with enormous satisfaction as his brother fell off his new broom onto the grassy floor below when his silent accio had snatched the Firebolt right out from under the Gryffindork.

Hedwig hooted reproachfully from her perch on the top of his wobbly dresser but Harry just flashed her a smug grin.

"What? You know I have to practice if I want to get better at combining wandless and soundless magic."

Hedwig hooted more forcibly than before and Harry ducked his head, cheeks reddening as he focused once more on his book on animagi.

He was hoping to become an animagus before the end of the year. If he could show the N.E.W.T. transfiguration examiner his animal form he'd be sure to get an Outstanding.

Wouldn't Professor McGonagall be shocked out of her stripes? She'd probably demand that Daniel, her star Gryffindor, prove that he too had an animal and Harry would be giddy with delight when Daniel turned out to be ignorant. He was hoping to become a magical beast of some sort even though it was infinitely less likely and much harder to actually obtain a magical animal form if he had the potential.

Harry, if nothing else, loved a challenge.

"What do you think, Hedwig?" Harry asked, angling the large tome in her direction and pointing to an image of a woman turning into a Norwegian Ridgeback. "Think I can turn into a dragon?"

Hedwig hooted disdainfully and Harry laughed at her before flipping the book back around to study the detailed chart.

"I don't think it will be too difficult. I think I'd fancy being a Hungarian Horntail or something equally wicked."

A quiet ruffling of feathers answered him and Harry nodded thoughtfully. In quiet contemplation Harry flipped the pages and read on about other magical animagi. He'd already finished the book on regular animagus forms, like the house cat Professor McGonagall could become at whim. Harry was pretty sure too, that despite the similar appearance to the grim, Snuffles, Sirius' name in dog form, was just a dog. Harry knew his dad was a stag, the corporeal form of his Patronus.

Harry thought his Patronus was one of his greatest accomplishments; he looked at it with no small amount of pride. He had been able to cast one since he was 13 years old; the same time Peter Pettigrew had escaped from Azkaban, the wizarding prison, in Harry and Daniel's third year. It was assumed that Peter would travel to Hogwarts and try to harm Daniel so the Ministry had sent Dementors to guard the school and Dumbledore had hired Remus to be that year's Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher.

Both Harry and Daniel had had adverse side effects from being near the Dementors and would frequently pass if they got too close. Not only that but their energy was waned and their performance in classes dropped considerably. Special notice was given to Daniel and Professor Lupin had taken his twin aside to teach him how to defend himself against the dark creatures.

When Harry found out he had not been invited to these after class meetings, he was furious. He then snuck in under a disillusionment charm and learned everything within weeks that Professor Lupin had been trying to pass on to Daniel for four months.

His first attempts with a Bogart in an abandoned classroom had rendered him passed out; when he woke up he was, cold and shivering with nausea. Stolen chocolate bars from the Hogwarts kitchens kept his energy and body temperature up and eventually he had produced a golden mist. From mist he'd created the stag and armed with the fully functional Patronus, Harry had no longer been bothered by the Dementors surrounding the school.

Yet, despite this amazing feat produced by a thirteen year old wizard, another thirteen year old received far more praise for slightly worse results. Daniel had somehow, after six months of trying, produced enough golden mist to block the Dementors and he no longer fainted. Deemed so impressive, he'd been told he didn't need to practice anymore unless he wanted to and, unsurprisingly, he hadn't.

§What are you reading?§ came a soft hissing voice.

Harry gave a start and looked over with a laugh at the green garden snake perched quite contentedly in the sun outside his window.

§You little wretch, Serion, how the hell did you get up here?§ Harry hissed back, setting aside his book and opening the window to pick the small snake up gently by it's coils.

Serion angled his head to the side and stuck his tongue out smugly. He wound himself around Harry's wrist to steal the warmth that pulsed there. When he was settled, Serion replied, *§There's a drain pipe on the other side that ends in the shrubbery. Wasn't all that hard once I found it.§*

§*Clever.*§

§*I think so,*§ Serion returned resting his head on the back of Harry's hand.

Hedwig hooted shrilly in annoyance and turned her back on them. Harry's parseltongue abilities always disconcerted her because she thought it highly unfair that any snake could communicate clearly with her owner. Her relationship with him was far more unique. At least that was what she thought.

Harry clucked at Hedwig's abrupt turn of face and opened a battered drawer on his desk that stuck a little and pulled out an owl treat. Hedwig cooed and took the treat, nibbling on Harry's fingers affectionately before flying to his bed and perching herself on one the headboard.

"That's my girl, Hedwig," Harry said happily before turning his attention back to Serion. §*I'm learning on how to change my body into an animal, but I want to learn everything about the process before attempting it even once.*§

§*Is that why you're reading a book that's at least a hundred pounds?*§ Serion hissed amusedly.

§*Hmm... laugh now,*§ Harry said pushing up his spectacles before finishing off with a strong douse of determination, §*--but I'm going to be the best animagus to come around in centuries.*§

Serion slithered up Harry's arm and curled around his neck. §*But you have to have the ability before you develop it do you not?*§ he observed quietly, his tongue tickling Harry's collarbone.

§*I know I have the potential.*§

§*So confident,*§ Serion hissed, §*but I know you haven't found the ritual rites in a book to figure that out for sure.*§

§*It's in one of these books,*§ Harry said dismissively. §*Don't ask me how I know I am going to be an animagus--I just know!*§

§But you still have to be sure before you proceed.§

§Know-it-all-reptile,§ Harry groused.

Serion uncoiled himself from around Harry's neck and slid haughtily off of the wizard, his snout stuck in the air as he slithered back to the open window. *§If you're going to be an arse, I'm not going to stick around.§*

§Don't be like that, Serion,§ Harry wheedled, following just behind the indignant little snake.

Serion snaked out the window and was already traveling along the narrow ledge back towards the house-pipe on the other side. *§I'll stick around when you've got better manners,§* was all he said.

Harry shook his head and picked up his book again. "Talk about mental. I just called him a reptile, which of course he is, because he is a snake."

Hedwig agreed with a low hoot. Happy to see Serion leave, she flew over and let Harry pet her. Harry was hers and she wasn't going to share him, especially not with a green ground worm. She watched interested as Harry propped the book up against his knees and once more sank into it's depths. Occasionally he would turn it around and point to something as he explained his ideas about this and that, and Hedwig would hoot encouragingly when appropriate.

When it got around to suppertime, Harry shut the book and hid it beneath his short stack of clothes inside his school trunk. Calmly walking toward the door, Harry gave Hedwig a little wave and exited. When he was sure Hedwig wouldn't be able to hear him, Harry sprinted off down the corridor and skidded to a halt in front of a small little wall mirror.

Quickly he tidied himself up. First he tugged on his sleeves to make them longer and not appear quite so short. Then he waved his hand down at his robes and concentrated until he heard the soft whirring of them cleaning and the brisk wiping motion against his body of an invisible lint roller. Frantically he tried to make his hair lie flat but failing that he brushed his hair down over his lightning bolt shape scar.

Hedwig never approved of this little routine of trying to be mistaken for his brother by his parents or his *uncles*. So he did it now, hopefully out of her sight. Hedwig would think it demeaning to his character and hoot indigently on his behalf, but there were some things that Harry just could not give up hope on. He wanted to be part of his family, not just a bystander looking in on them.

If he was lucky Lily would hug him tightly and call him Daniel before realizing she had the wrong twin and awkwardly step away from him. Maybe his dad would even ask about his Quidditch playing and he'd be able to sneak in a tale about one of his seeker moves against the Slytherins before being shut off with a distracted nod. Careful to not trip on the second stair with the crooked board just below the landing, Harry made his way down to the dining hall.

When he reached the first floor landing, his shoulders slumped in defeat when he saw Daniel there already basking in both of their parents' attentions. Harry stood still for a moment and surveyed the scene. The table had been elongated to sit Ron, Sirius, and Remus, all of whom were already seated and engaged in a lively discussion over which Quidditch team in the British League was best. Arguing was as much a sport for them as the game itself and the heightened red color in Ron's face said quite plainly that his beloved Chudley Canons were being isolated out and ruthlessly annihilated by the others.

Walking away from the stairwell into the dining room Harry looked around the table and realized with some disgruntlement that there wasn't a chair for him. Sighing swished his hand inconspicuously at the potted palm in the corner, transfiguring it into a matching chair. Briskly walking toward the chair, he plucked it up out of the corner and sat it at the end of the table about ten feet to the right of everybody else.

Quietly and unobtrusively, Harry took his seat and conjured up a place setting. Biting his lip in dejection, he unfolded his napkin deftly and proceeded to fill up his plate with the food his mum had cooked for the others. He methodically ate at his plate and listened to the banter going on between Sirius and his father. He watched with a

guarded expression as Lily placed third helpings on both Ron's and Daniel's plates but didn't grace him with seconds before she sat down.

Looking down hurriedly, lest the others see his expression, Harry wondered mirthlessly why he kept doing this to himself. He could easily sneak food from the kitchens when everyone was asleep and not have to put up with being outright ignored. But Harry just couldn't give up the hope that maybe, someday, they'd take notice of him again like they did before that October 31st.

An intense burning seared across his scar and Harry gasped, bending over his plate and rubbing it hard trying to alleviate the pain. The others continued to be oblivious to his pain and downright odd behavior. Discussion had changed to remarking upon changes and the lack thereof within Fudge's office as Minister of Magic.

Absolutely no one cared.

Harry dropped his silverware with a clatter and fought back a wave of nausea. It only intensified. Unable to stand it any longer, Harry gritted his teeth and staggered to his feet. As he attempted to retain his balance, he cast two *finites* at the objects he had wrought forth. Then he hurried out of the dining room and into the bathroom down to the left of the hall to throw up the food he just ate.

Wiping his mouth clean, Harry rested his forehead against the toilet seat. He laughed weakly after a moment had passed. Nobody was coming to see him to see what was wrong. Nobody had even noticed he'd been at the table.

"They'll probably wonder why the potted plant had been moved," he said under his breath, flushing the toilet and standing up to rinse out his mouth. "So much for dinner. Damn Voldemort."

The Dark Lord Voldemort, was the most feared Dark Lord to ever rise in the wizarding world. People were so terrified of him, they dared not speak his name and referred to him as "You-Know-Who." Nobody besides him and Dumbledore, not even his brother, said "Voldemort" out loud. Really it was just a name, hell, it wasn't even the git's real name. It's simply an anagram for Tom Marvolo Riddle, the thing who claimed to be the heir of Slytherin.

Harry learned of Voldemort's true name in second year and it was this guy's supposed death at the hands of a one year old baby boy that had heralded fame and glory of the Boy-Who-Lived. In truth, Harry couldn't say if it was Daniel or himself that had cast the Dark Lord out of his body for fourteen years, but it seemed awfully suspicious to him that he had the talents of this crazy bugger and his brother did not. Plus, Daniel never received any sensation in his scar, not like he did.

Two years ago, Voldemort had regained his body by kidnapping Daniel and stealing his blood. Daniel's escape from the graveyard wasn't nearly as extraordinarily heroic as many have been led to believe. True, wandless magic had been performed, as was the gossip, but it hadn't been Daniel who'd done it.

Unknown to either parties, Harry had somehow performed his first ever Apparition trying to get to Daniel when his scar had flared up. Disillusioning himself, Harry had surveyed the scene and from a distance away from the Death Eaters, he cast a spell to cut away his brother's ropes. Once free, Daniel had run like the dickens and headed towards the only escape route available... the same object that had delivered him to Voldemort.

When Daniel had tripped over his feet, he began crawling towards it and flung his hand out desperately in the direction of the Quidditch Cup that'd been turned into a Portkey by Barty Crouch Jr., who'd been Mad-Eye Moody's polyjuice imposture. Thinking quickly, Harry waved his wand and whispered a banishing charm that made it look like Daniel had summoned the cup wandlessly. Catching the cup, like the Chaser he was born to be, Daniel was whisked away from the graveyard leaving Harry to hear the chilling yell of rage from Voldemort.

The summoned Death Eaters had quailed and begged and crawled on their bellies to the demented wizard. Several crucios and a set of instructions later, Voldemort Apparated away. Soon after, the graveyard had cleared of Death Eaters and Harry had been left all alone, and Harry realized with a start that he didn't have a clue on how to get back or even where he was.

It turned out that he had been in Wales near Cardiff. It had taken Harry four days of walking and hitchhiking before getting to an area more like a small wizarding village than a town. It had taken some begging to obtain the use of the Floo Network at the only pub there before he finally managed to get back to Scotland and Hogwarts.

When Harry got back to Hogwarts, Daniel was being lauded as the returning hero once again and it was soon after his arrival and subsequent detentions from Professor Snape that Harry had discovered Barty's treachery. Unfortunately, Daniel had also been serving detention with him in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom at the time and had gotten all the credit. Again.

Now, as Harry looked up into the bathroom mirror at his pale and shaky form, he wondered what it was exactly that Voldemort was up to because he was unbelievably happy. And Voldemort being happy, unbelievably or not, was never a good thing.

Chapter 2

Harry woke to Hedwig hooting throatily at him. He smiled at the familiar morning ritual as he reached for his glasses. He groped around in the grey dark of early morning and succeeded in knocking his glasses to the floor. He cursed the morning ritual as he grabbed his glasses off the floor and put them on.

As the world came into slightly blurry view, Harry leaned over and groaned as he rubbed his forehead, tracing his reddened scar. His stomach rumbled hungrily and Harry remembered that dinner hadn't stayed down and reluctantly got to his feet.

"Did you happen to catch the license on that hippogriff?" Harry asked around a yawn, refusing to give into the lingering pain in his scar.

Hedwig hooted wryly and Harry chuckled. Uncaring this early in the morning, Harry grabbed the first available clothes, even if they were the rattiest at his disposal, and slung them over his arm. He ran a hand through his hair and trudged wearily into the bathroom across the hall to get ready for the day.

A long hot shower and a quick shave later, Harry was standing in front of the slowly defogging mirror trying to wandlessly charm his hair to lie flat, though he'd settle for not as messy. His unruly hair was already doing the infamous Potter thing and had sprung up all over the place. A half a dozen unsuccessful attempts later, Harry growled in frustration.

"Stupid bloody hair!" he cursed, turning away to grab the first garment in the stack of clothes he brought in with him.

"Now, now," the mirror tut-tutted. "You're hair is lovely, duckie."

"Well you'd be the first mirror to say so," Harry replied, his voice muffled by the shirt he was pulling his arms and head through.

"Trust me, duckie, it's roguishly handsome. The girls will like it," the mirror said knowingly.

Harry shook his head and pulled on his pants, wrinkling his nose at the inches of bare ankles that showed. He was going to have to learn some tailoring charms if he was ever going to look like something other than a rag-a-muffin. Either that or ask his parents for new clothes from Madam Malkins, which was about as likely to happen as Ron's beloved Chudley Cannons winning the tourney.

Leaving the bathroom, Harry saw that the sky was pinking up, which meant that it was getting close to the time his mother would be rising from bed. Harry decided to go downstairs and prepare breakfast for himself, knowing that James and Daniel would eat ridiculously large stacks of pancakes and that fighting for any was risking one's limbs. First though, he put on a pair of tatty socks and fetched Hedwig.

Downstairs, Harry and Hedwig separated in the kitchen. Harry grabbed a bowl and a frying pan and set about finding the ingredients to make himself his own stack of pancakes. Hedwig fluttered up to the top of the charmed ice box and watched him make breakfast.

Harry single-handedly cracked two eggs into a bowl and carefully mixed in a cup of flour and cream. Next he put in a tablespoonful of sugar and a teaspoon of baking powder before adding a pinch of salt and a pint of cold milk. Whipping it together into a runny batter, Harry also melted a little butter into the frying pan in preparation. With a grin of satisfaction, Harry pushed his glasses more firmly up his nose and started pouring himself his first pancake.

Less than ten minutes later, Harry had himself a small stack of English pancakes with powdered sugar coating the top of them. He poured himself a glass of milk and Hedwig a small bowl of water and sat down. Hedwig flew over and sat on the back of a chair opposite of Harry. She took a few sips of water as Harry cut up a pancake for her on a separate plate and handed it over.

Hooting appreciatively, Hedwig nibbled on her warm pancake as Harry liberally coated his own with maple syrup and dug in hungrily. The only sound to be heard was a hungry boy and hungry pet eating pancakes. When they were done, Harry stood up and took their dishes to the sink where he washed them carefully and placed them on the drying rack.

“What should we do today, Hedwig?” Harry asked his snowy owl as they made their way back upstairs and stepped into his room.

Hedwig took off from his shoulder and resumed her usual perch on his dresser in the corner. She cooed contentedly and puffed up her chest and began preening her feathers. Harry laughed as he considered his owl, she was so vain, she made Parvati and Lavender from Gryffindor look humble, but she was not nearly as bad as Draco Malfoy from Slytherin.

“Guess no time like the present to finish reading that book from yesterday,” Harry said with a laugh at Hedwig’s antics.

They settled in to their usual routines shortly thereafter with Harry being consumed by the magical animagus transformations book and Hedwig with her grooming. It wasn’t until sometime later that they were disturbed by James poking his head up into the hall and yelling that they were going to Diagon Alley and to hurry up. Of course, he’d been yelling at Daniel to get him down the stairs so that they could go, but Harry heard.

“Wonder why they’re going?” Harry mused aloud as he tugged on his shoes that were a smidge too tight in the toe and grabbed his worn cloak. “They already got him a broom. Maybe school supplies? But that doesn’t make any sense, we usually go later so Daniel can hang out with the Weasley’s.”

Hedwig didn’t get a chance to respond because Harry was already gone out of the room and down to the front hallway. There James was helping Lily into a sea-green cloak and making much ado about fastening it at her throat. Neither one greeted him when he came up to them so Harry didn’t say anything. Minutes later, Daniel came rushing down the stairs tying a money bag to his belt loops and musing up his hair so that it stuck out more wildly than before.

“Sorry Mum, Dad. I’m ready.”

Lily smiled beautifully as she straightened out Daniel’s deep green-blue cloak. “Don’t worry dear, your father wasn’t ready to leave just yet.”

At that James coughed and hid a grin behind his hand as Lily turned to glare at him. When her attentions were back on Daniel, James gave an wink that was exaggerated and laced with a promise of future conspiracy. After taking his own cloak from the hall closet and slinging over his arm, James motioned for them to follow him outside.

Lily cast a locking charm and gave it a password before following James and Daniel down the road. Harry, knowing the password because he lingered near the house, quickened his pace in pursuit of the others. It wasn't too long until they reached the Ottery St. Catchpole's Approved Ministry Apparition Site (AMAS) located between the Potter, Lovegood, Weasley, and Patil homes in the forest.

Harry watched in amusement as Daniel's hand latched unto James shoulder for a Side-Along Apparition. With a loud *pop*, his dad and brother disappeared and with another softer one his mum left leaving Harry all alone in the forest. Harry fingered his Apparition license in his back pocket and with a satisfied smirk, spun around on his heel and Apparated to Diagon Alley.

He reappeared at the AMAS in Diagon Alley located to the right of the Leaky Cauldron entrance. Diagon Alley was bustling with wizards, children, and parents of muggleborns all rushing about taking in the lovely weather London so rarely provided this time of year and shopping for school supplies. Up ahead he could see his parents walking with Daniel towards the large white building that housed the local branch of the goblin bank Gringotts. Deciding that was as good a place as any to start, Harry trailed behind his family.

Upon reaching Gringotts, Harry mounted the steps and mentally reviewed the business goblin etiquette he'd read about in one of books assigned for their O.W.Ls by the History of Magic professor, Professor Binns, who was the most boring professor at Hogwarts despite being a ghost. Palms sweating, Harry rubbed them against his pant leg before opening the massive doors and entering inside the cool building. Everything had to go according to plan if he was going to do this right and getting their respect was half the uphill battle.

So the first thing Harry did inside the massive lobby was scan the teller signs for the right one, the one with the longest beard, and stood in the short line of four. Fidgeting with his pockets and the wadded up paper in his the left one, Harry kept glancing around the bank. His attention would return to the back of the balding man's head in front of him for a few minutes before his attention was caught by those making loud conversation and exclamations in the other lines.

He was relieved when he got his turn at the station, though the goblin sitting behind it looked like he felt anything but relief. Harry bowed his head forward slightly before glancing up and meeting the goblin's gaze. The goblin arched an eyebrow inquiringly, but when Harry didn't break the stare, dutifully inclined his head.

"Welcome to Gringotts, may your riches ever exceed your needs. My name is Lagnort."

"Good day, Lagnort," Harry started, maintaining eye contact. "May our ventures be ever fruitful together. My name is Harry Potter and I have some inquiries about obtaining a new vault. Is there anybody that I could see that could help answer my questions?"

Lagnort sneered down at Harry for a moment and Harry fretted that he got the wording wrong. It was just as he turned to go, feeling like he'd wasted both of their times, that Lagnort called out. A goblin detached himself from the queue of waiting goblins to show the account owners to their vaults and scurried over.

"Prigha, show Mr. Potter to our Vault Opener."

"Yes, sir!" Prigha squeaked, and started walking away not giving Harry much of a chance to follow if he didn't run-walk alongside the goblin.

Four minutes later, Harry was sweating lightly and seated on a black cushion bench outside an office. There was a label on the door that read, 'Vault Openings Office,' with 'Mr. Raypirnk' underneath in italics. Harry fiddled with the crumpled up paper for a few minutes before pulling it out and studying the words written nearly illegibly on it by his own hand.

Absorbed in the questions it shocked Harry to hear him be addressed by name. A short well groomed goblin stood before him obscured by his bangs. He shuffled to his feet and bobbed his head in greeting.

“Mr. Raypirnk, thank you for taking the time to meet with me.”

“Nonsense,” Mr. Raypirnk said with a wave of his hand. “Gringotts always appreciates new gold.”

Harry flushed red. “I most likely will not be able to open a vault today or anytime soon. I’m still a Hogwarts student. This upcoming year is seventh year for me.”

Instead of looking upset by this news, Mr. Raypirnk visibly brightened and hurriedly ushered Harry into his office. After offering refreshments and a seat, the goblin sat behind his desk and folded his hands over the blotter. He leaned forward eagerly and smiled so that his pointy teeth showed visibly.

Harry licked his lips nervously. “So, umm, what are the requirements and obligations of vault ownership?”

Raypirnk leaned over to the filing cabinet and pulled open the middle drawer. A few minutes spent riffling through the folders, left Harry feeling slightly put out that was until the goblin handed over a medium sized file. Hesitantly, Harry took the file and set it in his lap.

“That should tell you your role as an investor and vault owner in Gringotts. It’ll tell you our role and depending upon your account how much interest you earn.”

“Minimum initial deposit?” Harry asked curiously, opening the file and glancing through.

“Yes, that too.”

Harry nodded, reading the page that he was at a little bit. “What are the standard protections in place on the average vault?”

“Ah, good question, Mr. Potter,” Mr. Raypirnk said agreeably and leaned back over to the filing cabinet and pulled out a truly

horrendous file but did not hand it over. "This, Mr. Potter," Raypirnk said, patting the file, "is anything you could possibly think of for vault security. It constantly updates itself based upon the work of our curse breakers. Truly remarkable and ingenious ideas are coming in from Egypt at the moment."

"I don't suppose you have a smaller copy or a copy of the file that I could have?"

Mr. Raypirnk shook his head. "Afraid not. When you set up and vault account here with us, we allow you to discern what types of charms and hexes and the like to protect it. We can also make suggestions if you are unsure."

"So there's nothing standard?" Harry asked confused. "You don't use some sort of goblin magic to protect vaults?"

If it was possible, Harry was quite sure the grin Mr. Raypirnk was wearing would have split the goblin's face.

"Yes, we do."

"What are they?"

Mr. Raypirnk reached over and selected a relatively thin file from the upper drawers and handed it over. "Inside you'll find the names of our securities and what they mean. Nothing on how to break it or cast it yourself, not that we'd expect you to be able to being a wizard, but here at Gringotts we take care to protect our customers."

"Who has access, goblin and wizard alike, to the vault besides myself?"

"Any goblin assisting you from the main floor is updated on our register for your vault and has a unique signature. We know who goes in and out of your vault, when, for how long, and what they take with them when they go.

"Then there's the Head of Security, the President of the Bank, and the Managers; each with their own passes that log them in on the

register. Wizards? None, except those that you add and get a key issued for their use of your vault.”

Harry tilted his head down to look at his paper again. He folded it and smiled, stacking the files given to him neatly. “Why keys?”

“Nasty curse on them if handled by someone with ill intent.”

“So someone could pick it up if they meant to turn it in and not use it to gain access to a vault they’re not authorized for?”

“Exactly.”

Harry laughed, and climbed to his feet. Mr. Raypirnk shook his hand and showed him back to the main floor of the bank. Enormously satisfied with the conversation he’d just finished, Harry exited the building. Back out on the busy alley, Harry made his way towards Knockturn Alley.

He was hoping to browse some of the seedier shops for a few rare books on animagus training, specifically the manuals mentioned from the book he was nearly finished with back home. He was hoping to find the rituals ‘Potential For Becoming’ and the ‘Prepping the Body for the Change’ in some of the new books. The others mentioned were not nearly as important being as they dealt with accidents. There were ones such as now-that-your-stuck-mid-transformation, stuck-on-the-reversal-process, and animal-to-wizard mind altering rituals.

It was because of these pamphlets that Harry got to be where he was currently; stuck behind a locked wardrobe at Borgin & Burkes. The shifty proprietor was attempting to smooth-talk Lucius Malfoy into buying one of several items that he’d bought at basement bargain prices for outlandish prices.

“I don’t think you understand, Mr. Borgin,” Lucius sneered in his oily aristocratic tones. “It is imperative that the cup is in my hands. You can not adequately protect it.”

“I’m not trying to protect the cup, Mr. Malfoy,” Borgin returned in a dry snide voice. “I am trying to sell it and keep my business running.”

Lucius leaned forward so that his sharp nose nearly touched the older man's face. "You would not want to make--" his gaze darted left-to-right before he dropped his voice to a whisper.

Harry was almost sure the name being passed was Voldemort's. His suspicions were confirmed when Mr. Borgin stepped back immediately and looked to be sweating. He fidgeted nervously for several seconds before closing his eyes and taking a calming breath. When he opened his eyes, Harry could still see fear lurking within them but it was masked by his newfound determination.

"If indeed he wants it, he must pay something for it. I am not running a charity nor am I on my own philanthropic. I expect some payment for the object in question. Considering the history of cup in question, I would say it is more than fair to part with it at 25,000 galleons."

"Unbelievable! This is inexcusable-- he is going to be less than pleased with you, Borgin," Malfoy hissed, grabbing his cane and spinning around on his heel.

After Lucius was gone, Harry saw Borgin look about fretfully and mutter something unintelligible. The man paced for a moment and then rushed into the back to do who knows what. Eventually Harry tentatively snuck out from around the wardrobe only to have a hand clasp around his arm tightly. Startled, Harry tried to yank his arm away only to have the hand grip his forearm tighter. Foul breath blew in his face as Mr. Borgin struggled with Harry.

"Well, well, what do we have here? What is the Boy-Who-Lived doing here in my shop?"

"Eavesdropping," Harry said flippantly, managing to regain his captured arm when Borgin let go with a yelp and looked down at his reddened hand.

Borgin looked up calculatingly, his beady eyes narrowing before nodding to himself. "Then you must want the cup for yourself."

Harry paused from his walk to the door at those words and carefully turned around to face the short fat man. "I could not possibly pay 25,000 galleons for a cup."

“How about 25 galleons?” Borgin inquired, stalking back to the case and unlocking the cabinet with a set of keys from his pocket.

“Let me see the cup first,” Harry returned casually, hands slipping into the back pockets of his jeans. “You might have to throw in some animagus ritual pamphlets in with that price if I’m going to help you out.”

“Just take a look at the cup before you go and make assumptions of worth,” Borgin retorted somewhat putout.

He then pulled out the small golden cup with rubies running it’s circumference and came back to Harry where he proceeded to hand it over. A zing traveled up Harry’s arm at contact before fading rapidly. Carefully studying the cup, Harry put on a puzzled frown.

He was unable to see why Voldemort and subsequently Lucius would want the silly little cup. That was until he flipped it over. He raised an eyebrow at the intricate double Hs stamped into the bottom of the cup.

“Helga Hufflepuff?” Harry asked suspiciously, staring hard at Borgin who tried to pass a pleasant smile and nod of affirmation. “Now why would Lucius want to get a cup that may or may not belong to one of the four founders?”

“It’s not just a cup, Mr. Potter. Lucius wants it because I believe it to be what is called a Horcrux.”

Harry looked up sharply at the term, that was obviously magical, but whose origins he did not know. Wearily, he asked, “What’s a Horcrux?”

“Research it,” Mr. Borgin said losing his pretense at being affable. “Are you going to take it or not?”

“Are you going to get me my pamphlets to go with the cup? Because if you’re not, you’re wasting my time.”

An ugly look crossed the man’s features. His face turned red-purple before fading quickly with an exhalation of breath. “Fine, you measly little runt, I’ll toss in the pamphlets.”

Harry smirked and palmed the cup up into his sleeve in a great show of slide of hand. He stood there waiting patiently for the darkly muttering Mr. Borgin to return with his pamphlets. They'd been much easier to obtain than he'd expected, considering he thought that he'd have to steal them when he came upon them in the store under the dusty glass cases.

Being mistaken as his brother certainly made things go much easier. Now he didn't have to show wand I.D. to charge the family vaults, where as '*Harry*' could not because of the frivolous purchases James thought he'd make. Borgin returned from the far-left back of the shop and with a disgruntled expression handed the animagus leaflets over. A quick glance through the text proved that they were indeed what he was looking for.

"Good. I'll take everything. Charge it to the Potter Vault."

Mr. Borgin looked like he was about to argue the payment plan when Harry gave him a hard stare and the miserable man shrank back with an inaudible grumble.

"I'm going to need you to sign the Gringott's Merchant Receipt Form, Mr. Potter," he finally said with a wince.

Harry did easily, having had practice forging his brother's sloppy signature in the past and left the store whistling a jaunty tune. Nobody accosted him as he left Knockturn Alley and he easily slipped back in amongst the mingling witches and wizards on Diagon Alley enjoying ice cream and window shopping. He made a beeline for Flourish and Blotts to look up Horcruxes, thinking that the real value in the cup was not in it's history but in what it represented.

Several hours later, Harry was beyond frustrated and stalked up to the front counter where the tall reedy man with a mustache handed a mother her daughter's school purchases with a genial smile. The smile faded when the man took in Harry's expression. He tried to replace it back on his face but found he was unable and settled for asking if he could help.

"I bloody well hope so," Harry huffed irritably at the salesman before relenting. "I've been looking for books with references to Horcruxes

but you don't seem to have any in your store. It's imperative that I get some as quickly as possible."

A whisper of fear flashed in the tall man's eyes before being snuffed out. This nonverbal response intrigued Harry more so than the tense verbal response the man gave him, which was a terribly bland, "I am terribly sorry, Mr.--?"

"Potter," Harry answered easily, hoping for another case of mistaken identity.

"Mr. Potter," the salesman repeated, "but I'm afraid we don't carry anything about Horcruxes. Haven't since the Ministry ban."

Harry swore and inclined his head in insincere gratitude. "Fine, thank you."

He left Flourish and Blotts, frustrated, but fascinated at the salesman's response to his query. Pondering this, Harry slowly made his way back to the AMAS located by the Leaky Cauldron. It was nearly 4 o'clock now and the day had waned during his running around. He took his time enjoying the last sights, sounds, and smells he'd have of the area until next year.

His last look of the alley allowed him a brief glimpse at Hermione Granger in all her bushy-hair glory exit Madam Malkins with her parents. She seemed to be heading to the bookstore that he'd just come from himself. With a shake of his head, Harry checked the security of his purchases and spun around on his heel and left with a nearly silent *pop*.

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 2°«««°»»»°

Chapter 3

Daniel was glorifying in his new purchases by the time Harry got home. He was surrounded by so much junk, that Harry was surprised he didn't trip over things just by breathing. Daniel was trading out all of his new school supplies with his old ones in a highly showy manner. Shaking his head at his brother's foolishness, Harry clambered up the stairs to his room and dumped the cup, Gringotts folders, and the animagus pamphlets on his bed. He'd go and grab the newly discarded effects from the rubbish bins later that night.

Picking the Hufflepuff cup from the bedspread Harry started tossing it from hand to hand. The cup shot another set of tingles through his arms that slowly dissipated away. Hedwig hooted in puzzlement at his frown. He looked up and smiled as she launched herself off of the dresser and flew over to his bed.

"Hey girl, miss me?" Harry asked while petting the crown of her head with the back of his knuckle.

Hedwig closed her eyes briefly and leaned into the touch before pulling back. She stood on his bedspread watching him while he unloaded the folders of their contents. Shortly after Harry was up to his eyebrows in paperwork and felt like bashing his head against the wall. No wonder the goblin, Raypirnk, had grinned insanely at his declaration about not being able to get an account.

He'd bet anything that the proper procedure when bringing over new clients was *not* tossing a load of gibberish rubbish at them. Getting nowhere fast, Harry just ended up creating three stacks of papers. They were loosely organized into vault responsibilities, vault benefits, and vault protection. He would tackle them later when he had a clearer head, Harry decided.

Running downstairs Harry grabbed himself a plate of leftovers from the fridge and heated it with a wandless warming charm. Carefully, he snuck past his family sitting in the dining room and ran upstairs. Back in his bedroom, Harry set the plate on top of his desk and gingerly sat down in the broken chair.

He ate quickly and after two tries banished his plate back to the kitchen below. Stretching, he grabbed a quill and a roll of parchment. Then he tried to make headway again with the Gringott's piles. In the end, Harry still felt like a confundus charm had been cast upon him and pushed it all away with a disgruntled sigh.

Perking up, Harry pulled the animagus pamphlets towards him and gleefully opened the first one on 'Potential For Becoming.' It wasn't a long read, considering $\frac{3}{4}$ of the book was a list of ingredients and directions for brewing the potion required. The other $\frac{1}{4}$ was about the rune work involved in a short but precise ritual and the history of the ritual. There was also a stamp of Ministry Approval on the back cover that Harry was positive had been faked since all things animagus were regulated.

'Prepping the Body for the Change,' was similar in it's set up. However, the potion to be drunk by the witch or wizard required nothing short of a bloody miracle to pull off. Practically all of the ingredients reacted badly with at least one other and required such precision during preparation that even cutting at the wrong angle could ruin the entire contents of the cauldron. Not only that but it was time consuming and would take Harry well over three months to brew--and that's with using Hogwarts's facilities and fresh ingredients!

"This is positively ridiculous!" Harry exclaimed angrily, shutting the pamphlet and stuffing it in his desk. "Hedwig, how am I suppose to do this? How the hell did Dad and Sirius and Remus do it? And Peter bloody Pettigrew! How did he do it? It's an individual preparation!"

Hedwig hooted wryly and Harry stopped mid rant and chuckled. His chuckling escalated into a full blown riot. A few minutes later Harry settled down and started getting ready for bed.

Just before he blew out his candle he stared thoughtfully at Hedwig. "But seriously, how did they do it? They were 5th years."

Hedwig blinked her bright yellow eyes and shuffled her feathers before flying out the open window with a coo. Harry shrugged and piled his spectacles on the nightstand. He laid on his back and stared blankly at the blurry ceiling and thought about the upcoming year.

It was four days before September first and the train to Hogwarts. Harry wasn't sure if he was thrilled or not. He was sure he'd liked to be back in classes and be able to explore the Restricted Section of the library looking for the term Horcrux. He was even certain he would, in spite of the ridiculous measures involved with the whole process, enjoy having the time and space to work on his animagus training. He'd even get to play Quidditch!

All these great things would happen at Hogwarts and yet he wasn't thrilled to be going back. It certainly wasn't the threat of Voldemort bothering him. He'd fooled the Dark Poofter before. Maybe it was because Daniel was the new Headboy. Or maybe it was because he was looking forward to another friendless year. It could also be that 7th year just marked the end of his childhood and no one cared what he did with his life afterwards.

Shortly thereafter Harry fell asleep. The night passed by uneventfully and with the next day came news of Voldemort's strike against some muggleborn homes in Wales. Harry sat and soberly read the Prophet's report while reflecting on the pain from his scar from dinner not too long ago. Absently he rubbed it as if to swipe away any lingering prickles of pain.

The next three days were spent shuffling between the Potter library with it's section on goblins and his room. Passages of pure gobbledygook required hours of translating and then fixing with a rune or two and a deciphering spell. When Harry had finally mucked through it all he knew the answers to the questions he'd asked earlier.

Harry also used that time to ponder the bloody Hufflepuff cup. The Potter library yielded nothing in his search for Horcruxes and there wasn't a lot of information either about any of the founders. What once where small tingles form the cup had turned in to full blow electric shocks, and Harry wanted to know why.

He poked his wand at it and it would jiggle skittishly on his desk. So in trying to get more of a response from the golden object Harry tried out what he'd seen Snape do with a piece of parchment, Daniel had once. He pointed his wand directly at the cup and intoned severely, "Reveal, your secrets."

The cup flew out of his hand with a small explosion causing Harry to yelp in pain. His skin had reddened rapidly and was sore to the touch. When he got close to it now, the cup would wobble and hiss threateningly, so he packed it in his trunk and left it alone. Even with the small setbacks, he was immensely pleased with himself.

Boredom struck not too long after and Harry found himself revising his homework just for something to do. Hedwig was displeased with the doldrums that Harry was going through and tried perking him up with a dead mouse, but that didn't bring a smile to his face. After a while she left to go hunting and so Harry found himself the night before the holidays ended with a growling stomach.

Deciding to join the rest of his family, Harry tromped down the stairs to the summer's 'end of hols' dinner made up of all of Daniel's favorites. The smell was delicious and mouthwatering when he reached the landing and Harry hurriedly followed his nose into the dining room. After entering Harry halted, flabbergasted. He was then greeted by the Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Albus Dumbledore.

"Uh... Good evening, Headmaster," Harry responded dumbly before starting and hastily taking his customary seat, which happened to be directly across from the wizened wizard.

"Are you looking forward to the start of term, Harry?" Dumbledore inquired after cutting a bite of roasted ham and chewing it thoughtfully.

Harry looked up and met the Headmaster's eyes briefly before looking down at his plate. "Yeah, sure. Can't wait to get back to the library and Quidditch pitch."

"That's right," Dumbledore said, watching him and making Harry nervous. "You're going to be first string seeker for Ravenclaw now that Miss Chang has graduated."

Harry glanced up again and looked back and forth from his mother to his father and finally on Daniel. "Yes, sir," he answered finally.

"Daniel's looking forward to the next season," Lily said reaching forward to the green bean casserole and giving herself and James seconds.

"I'm sorry you didn't make captain, Daniel," Dumbledore replied looking over to Daniel, who was sitting on the other side of Harry.

Daniel paused mid-chew, shifted his food around and said, "Yeah, I don't know what Professor McGonagall was thinking giving it to Ron. I have seniority!"

"By like three days, Daniel," Harry grumbled under his breath.

Daniel shot him a glare but said nothing as he swallowed and then drank heavily of his pumpkin juice. "Can I have more ham, mum?"

Lily smiled adoringly and asked Dumbledore if he'd mind passing Daniel the plate of ham. Dumbledore wiped his mouth on his beard instead of his napkin and proceeded to do as requested with a twinkle in his eye.

"I'm sure Minerva had a reason for it, Daniel, my boy," the Headmaster said as Daniel took the plate and piled more food than he could possibly eat in a sitting onto his plate.

"If you say so Professor," Daniel replied.

James shook his head and around his mouthful of food argued, "I don't believe Minnie has her head on straight. Daniel is the best player on the team and Ron, bless the boy, is practically the worst player ever to be on the Gryffindor team."

"Exactly!" Daniel exclaimed, perking up.

"He's loads better at strategy than you, though," Harry retorted under his breath. "You couldn't plan your way out of a broom cupboard."

"Shut it, you!" Daniel snipped, facing Harry and spraying him with a few flecks of food. "I am loads better than Ron."

"Harry," James reprimanded sharply, glaring at him..

"Harry, stop riling Daniel up this instant," Lily scolded sternly. "If you don't behave you can't have any dessert."

Harry stared at them for a minute causing Lily to raise an eyebrow at him. "Sorry mum, dad," he said weakly, stabbing a green bean. "My humblest apologies brother-of-mine."

The Headmaster was oddly silent while staring steadily at Harry and Daniel for a minute before deftly changing the topic and breaking the sudden tension that had arisen. Harry moodily ate at his plate, not bothering to follow conversation and they cheerfully left him out. When he finished, Harry quietly asked to leave and left without ever getting a response.

As he was exiting he heard Dumbledore turn to his parents and ask about his recent behavior. He slouched up the stairs in defeat when they'd passed it off as his normal behavior. It really wasn't his fault that he couldn't socialize, was it? After all he had nobody to socialize with, other than Hedwig and occasionally Serion.

Upstairs, Harry packed his trunk as slowly as he could. He put the robes Daniel had recently tossed at the bottom. All were carefully folded after several attempted and failed wandless ironing charms that left the hems a bit singed. He did however successfully transfigure the school badge, something he had too much practice with, without his wand.

Then Harry set his school books on the bottom to the left of the stack of robes in two neat piles. He triple checked that the restricted section library books were all there and readily accessible for a quick run to the library before the opening feast. The pamphlets for animagus training were stuffed into his cauldron that rested in the wedge of space between the books and the robes.

Hedwig's cage was shrunk and tucked in beside the cauldron alongside her bag of owl treats. Following that were his ink wells, quills, and rolls of recycled parchment. Regular clothes were then folded and placed on top of the robes until the right side of the trunk was filled. It took some work, but Harry managed to stuff the trunk with his potions kit.

Harry surveyed the room and deciding it packed, cleaned it with some well aimed *scourgiflies* at the dustiest spots. Shortly after tidying up the room he got ready for bed and climbed in between the sheets.

His scar prickled annoyingly. Harry rubbed it irritably and scrubbed the rest of his face once. Another twinge raced through his scar and he rubbed it again. Harry turned over onto his side and punched his pillow into a ball. If he could just get to sleep, he'd be okay.

"Bloody Tosser," Harry grumbled, punching his pillow again when another spike of pain ripped through his scar.

Quiet meditation allowed Harry to shut out those feelings in his scar and fall asleep. The next morning Harry woke up feeling well and refreshed. They had about an hour before they had to get to the train station so Harry rushed through his shower and dressed. Downstairs in the chaos of the kitchen, Harry grabbed a few slices of bacon to munch on, while watching with amusement as Lily berated Daniel for not having packed already.

"We're going to be late!" Lily bemoaned, putting another ration of bacon in front of James who scarfed it down and asked with pleading eyes for some more.

Lily huffed and pulled both Daniel's and James' plate from the table in annoyance and took them to the sink.

"Hey! I was still eating, Mum!"

"I will not be sending anything you forget today through the post, young man. Go upstairs and pack your things right now."

"What about Harry?" Daniel griped, shoving his chair under the table and glaring at his twin.

"I've already packed," Harry said around a bite of bacon, smirking up at his brother.

"Stop it, James," Lily scolded, smacking his hand away from her plate.

James nursed his hand and pouted. "Ow, woman! That hurt!"

"It'll hurt more if you try it again!"

"Bacon Nazi," James grumbled under his breath.

Daniel gave one last moody glare and stalked from the room and up the stairs. Harry took another bite of bacon and got up from the table. He went and poured himself a glass of orange juice from the fridge and pulled out some fruit as well. Lily and James were arguing behind him about breakfast and the proper amount of bacon that was to be served for the meal.

"You'll get high cholesterol, James, dear," Lily said high-handedly and ate the last piece of bacon from her plate before moving onto the scrambled eggs.

"Lily, love, I'm never going to get high coal-lester-all! I'm a wizard! Muggle medicine doesn't hold a broomstick to the stuff Madam Pomfrey can do!"

Harry shook his head at their antics as he sat back down at the table to eat the fruit and drink his juice. Daniel came back downstairs complaining that he couldn't find his new broom and couldn't possibly continue packing until he knew where it was. James laughed at his son's childishness and sent an *accio* out for the broom.

"Wherever it is, son, it'll be here soon. We're leaving in ten minutes for the train so you better hurry up. Your mum sounded serious about not shipping you anything you've forgotten."

"I don't know how Molly does it," Lily said shaking her head and going over to the sink to put on the charmed automatic dish washer. "I know it's only Ron and Ginny this year, but how did she get them all ready when she had five going all at the same time? It's hard getting one kid ready to go!"

Harry scowled at that declaration and stuffed the rest of the fruit into his mouth, chewed, swallowed, and drank the rest of his juice in one go. Standing abruptly from the table he grabbed his dishes and dropped them uncaringly into the sink. He stalked from the room afterwards and hurried up the stairs.

"One kid, my arse, Mum," Harry growled, slamming his door into the wall as he stomped into the room.

The sight of Serion was on his desk sunning stopped Harry in his tracks. The dark cloud hovering over his head evaporated as he walked over to the little green snake.

§I thought I wasn't going to see you again.§ Harry hissed, petting the crown of Serion's head.

Serion lifted his head and yawned. *§I coming with you to Hogwarts.§*

§You never wanted to before, what's changed your mind, Serion?§ Harry said, perplexed as he petted the snake.

§What? And let you go on to your 7th year and never come back? I don't think so,§ Serion sniffed. *§Besides you're the best conversation I have around here when you aren't a whiny brat.§*

Harry's eyes narrowed menacingly, before he relaxed and said with a smirk on his lips, *§I may be a whiny brat, but it's better than being a cantankerous sycophant.§*

§You take that back, human!§

§Relax, Serion, I'm only pulling your tail,§ Harry soothed, collecting his trunk and putting the Hufflepuff cup in his trouser pocket. *§If you're coming you better hurry up and climb up my sleeve, because I'm going downstairs.§*

§Don't jostle me,§ Serion hissed, snaking up Harry's wrist and wrapping himself around the warm flesh of Harry's upper arm.

§Never your royal highness,§ Harry replied with heavy sarcasm.

"Hedwig, you better take off now," Harry said turning to Hedwig and stroking her feathers once Serion slithered out of sight. "I'll see you at Hogwarts, girl."

Hedwig hooted and took off through the open window. Harry shut it after her departure and heaved his trunk down the stairs into the

foyer. Lily and Daniel were there but his dad was not. He gave a questioning look to Daniel, who just ignored him. Shrugging in indifference, Harry leaned back against the credenza and crossed his arms, careful not to hurt Serion.

"Mum, we're going to be late if Dad doesn't hurry up," Daniel said, rolling his eyes and slumping against the wall.

"Your father wants to take pictures of your last start-of-the-year train ride. He gets sentimental at times."

"I'd rather he not, it's embarrassing Mum!" Daniel said with a huff. "Besides I'm sure that Collin Creevey will be there to snap the moment of the famed Daniel Potter's last train ride."

"Unless you go home for Christmas," said Harry, raising his gaze from the interesting scuff spot on the floor. "Then it'd be your second to last."

"Well..." Daniel hedged for a minute before wincing as James came running around the corner with an absolutely ancient Muggle camera slung around his neck.

"Sorry 'bout that, Lily love," James panted, doubling over to catch his breath. "Just wanted to get a few snaps of Junior here, making his last hurrah."

"Ss... plural, Dad," Harry muttered under his breath as he picked up his trunk by its handle. "Or in case you didn't notice, you have two sons."

James fairly bounced with excitement as he patted his pockets in search for the Portkey that would whisk them off to the station. He found it in the twelveth pocket in his coat and held it out to them with an eager expression. It was a Muggle slingshot and Harry couldn't fathom how James acquired it.

"Ready everybody?" he asked, and at receiving nods of affirmation, proceeded the countdown.

The familiar tug behind the naval, heralded the initiation of the Portkey. It always made Harry feel a bit queasy in the stomach, but he was fairly certain this was the normal reaction everybody had. Looking about Harry was able to see something other than swirling blurs of color whip around him and took that as the hint to start breaking.

Harry let go of the slingshot and hoisted himself upright and walked on the air before him. As he slowed, more and more shapes started appearing and connecting into recognizable objects. He landed on his feet in the middle of the train station and then took two stumbling steps forward. Luckily, he didn't fall down.

Daniel was not so lucky and landed with a whump on the 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ Platform. The Hogwarts train whistled welcomingly at them and a few other new arrivals to the scene. It's gold lettering proudly displaying the school's name and credo about tickling sleeping dragons. Multicolored smoke drifted from the exhaust pipe in glittering text, adverts for everyday magical must-haves like Degnoming Kits and Industrial Family Broomsticks.

Harry took in the sight of mothers and fathers waving off their kids and hearing the clicking noise of James' camera snapping Daniel's image. Daniel kept trying to fend him off to go find friends, but then Lily would want to claim one more hug. It was an embarrassment Harry wished was his, as his brother's cheeks reddened and his eyes darted frantically around hoping nobody saw him getting kissed by his mom.

But seeing as Harry had no farewell from his parents and no friends to worry about retaining a cool image for, he just took his trunk and walked across the platform. He hopped the train and jerked his trunk upwards to lift it over the steps and walked on through the narrow corridors looking for an empty compartment. He found one in the back and slipped inside.

Serion untangled from his arm almost as soon as he sat down on the familiar cushion. The little green snake hissed something unintelligible and slithered over to a bright patch of sunlight. Harry watched in amusement before leaning over and opening his trunk. He

pulled out his animagus pamphlets and the restricted section book on advance animagus training and tapped them both with his wand to hide their covers. Then he placed his trunk in the overhead compartment and settled in to reread for the hours spent chugging towards Hogwarts in Scotland.

A soft swooshing noise revealed Hermione Granger looking oddly nervous in the doorway. Serion slithered out of sight at the first sign of disturbance and missed detection. Harry looked up curiously from his book and found that the train was already pulling out of the station as he glanced out the window before returning his gaze on the frizzy haired Ravenclaw girl wearing the Headgirl badge proudly over her rather nice left breast.

"I knew you would get it," Harry said by way of greeting, looking down at her chest.

Hermione seemed puzzled for a minute before glancing down. It was as if seeing the badge instilled some kind of courage in her and she straightened up, her hair practically bristling as she barged her way into his compartment without invitation.

"Sure, come on in. It's not like somebody was here already," Harry said sarcastically, as he shut his book. "What do you want, Granger?"

"To sit down," she replied primly, stuffing her trunk in next to his and placing a cat carrier on the seat directly across from him.

"I would have thought the Headgirl had better manners, then to barge into somebody else's compartment without invitation," Harry retorted, leaning his head back against the seat.

Hermione flushed. "It was full elsewhere on the train."

"Daniel is in the front of the train, before you ask me out."

"ASK YOU OUT!" Hermione exclaimed in indignation, bolting upright from her position across from him. Her hands clenched and unclenched repeatedly by her sides.

"Girls do it all the time with Daniel," Harry returned, unfazed by her outburst. "I thought I'd warn you and save you the discomfiture of asking the wrong twin."

Hermione flushed a red that would put a Weasley to shame as she fumed. "There is no where else to sit, we have more first years this year than in previous years. The compartments are overflowing," she informed him, turning her nose up.

"Make yourself at home then," Harry said, a bit miffed at her implications that she wouldn't have sat near him if there had been space elsewhere. He flipped open his book again, doing his best to try and ignore the girl across from him.

"What are you reading?" Hermione asked, shifting the animal carrier over on the seat and leaning forward as if to pluck it right out of his hands.

Harry moved the book out of reach and angled the cover upwards for her to see.

"You know, I've read that twice over the summer. It was really helpful in doing the essay assigned by Professor Snape."

"I know."

"Though why you're reading it now is beyond me," Hermione said, pushing her bushy hair behind her ear as she continued talking. "You should have done your homework ages ago."

"Don't you have a meeting to go to?"

"No, I'm letting your brother handle it. Honestly, Harry I don't mind helping you with your homework if you need it. I do it for others all the time *and* you know how Professor Snape picks on you in class. You really should have done it sooner, so just try to be a little more--"

"I've already done Professor Snape's essay," Harry cut in, trying to stop her running diatribe.

Hermione looked at him disbelievingly before shrugging and said, "Then, let me see it. I'll look over it for you."

Harry shifted awkwardly in his seat. "There's no need--"

"There's every need!" Hermione retorted. "Ravenclaw can't lose points on the first day back. Besides, Harry, everybody knows just how bad you are at potions."

"Listen here, Granger--"

"Hermione."

Harry paused and then acquiesced. "Hermione, I lose points in potions class, but not in my grades. I'm the best potions student Snape has had since the start of his tenure at Hogwarts, and he's just pissed about it because I'm a Potter, okay? I don't need your help."

Hermione looked put out for a moment. Harry watched as she gathered herself up and got ready to argue her point again and mentally prepared himself for the outburst.

"Even if what you're saying were true, I could read over it and help you out. I am after all at the top of our year."

"For someone so smart," Harry said, crossing his arms to glare at her, "you sure are dumb."

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 3°«««°»»»°

Chapter 4

Hermione was currently a very impressive molted red color. She was sitting across from him staring violently into a copy of *Hogwarts, A History*. Harry watched her from behind his own book and guessed that her current complexion was due to his rather blunt correction, asserting himself as the number one student in their year.

She had known she wasn't number one in their year, but to find out she hadn't even been first in her house while having her intelligence insulted had probably tied her up in knots. Of course, he wasn't really sorry. At least he didn't think so. The witch had always made disparaging remarks about the 'student who thought he'd gotten one over her,' when she found out she hadn't received the top marks on an assignment, as if someone being better than her was a sin.

Harry spared a glance of the window. They'd been sitting in silence as the train raced along the tracks for nearly an hour. It made the color in her face even more impressive. He could feel the gentle swaying motion of the train under their feet as the scenery went whizzing by the window. As they progressed the sky got darker until all the cabin lights flickered on.

Harry sighed. This was decidedly uncomfortable. What he wouldn't give to be alone and thus able to talk to Serion. The little green snake had slithered up into the remaining cubby hole space by their trunks in an effort to keep away from the ginger monstrosity Hermione had set loose. The kneazle was ugly as sin in Harry's opinion and should be put out of it's misery.

His scar prickled again and Harry rubbed it with his knuckle as nonchalantly as possible so that Hermione wouldn't notice and question him about it. Not that she was talking to him at the moment, but he wouldn't put it past her. He flipped the page on the book and watched the female figure change into a dragon in the most spectacular of ways.

He started wondering about what his animagus form would be and exactly how he could pilfer the required ingredients for the first potion from Snape without alerting the greasy-hair git to what he was doing. It would be tricky, but with a decent plan, not impossible. Of course,

Harry had the perfect spot to brew the potion without any interference. That was if you didn't mind the ghost.

The train shook violently and Harry jerked his head towards the window. It was nearly pitch black outside and lightning lit up the sky. They couldn't be close to Hogwarts, could they? He'd thought the rain would hit as they were pulling into the station. Craning his neck he tried to see out of their compartment into the darkness beyond.

"Where are we?" Harry asked, scooting closer and peering outside.

Hermione looked at their reflections in the window and shook her head. "We've got about two hours to Hogwarts, I think. I wasn't planning for rain, though. My parents didn't say it would rain when they checked on the weather earlier today."

"Hmm," Harry muttered, pressing his nose to the glass as the first wave of the downpour fell from the clouds above in a thunderous roar. "Odd."

"Odd?" Hermione repeated, questioningly and look at him as if he had two heads. "What's odd about rain?"

"Nothing," Harry answered distractedly, standing up and pulling his trunk down from the shelf.

He opened it away from Hermione's curious eyes and put the book away, making sure the pamphlets stayed hidden in the book. He then dug down to find their D.A.D.A. book for the year and pulled it out. Harry then closed his trunk and heaved it back onto the shelf.

§*Watch it!*§ Serion hissed menacingly causing Hermione's cat to growl lowly.

"It's okay Crookshanks," Hermione said bending to pick up the kneazle. She sat back against the seat, petting and cooing the irate beast.

Harry took the Defense book and thumbed the table of contents for a moment before switching to the back and looking through the index. Harry scanned the L section until he ran across the entry he was

looking for. Placing his finger over Lethifold, Harry traced the line to find pg 396. He flipped to the correct page and started skimming.

The Lethifold likes to live in warm tropical places. Lethifolds are characterized as dark shapeless shadows hovering over the ground. They hunt by spreading lethargic warmth wherever they go, which caused their victims to slip into dreamless sleep. Then they smother them, feasting on their unconsciousness until dry and finish by eating their victims whole. A Lethifold can be repelled by a Patronus.

Harry also found the three variants of the Lethifold. He checked the index and rifled the pages of the defense book hurriedly all the while watching the sky. The train continued to rock ominously and shuddered with every thunderclap.

Harry knew the first from third year as it was the Dementor. It was a native inhabitant of Great Britain and was in fact guarding the wizard prison. The Dementor, caused a seeping chill to literally ice its surroundings before sucking the very happiness and hope out of a person or wizard. It could also suck the soul out of a person and like the Lethifold, was easily repelled by the Patronus charm.

The second was a Siccus, which was Latin for dry. It lived in the region of the Gobi Desert in Mongolia. In its presence all living things would dry up, which probably explained the region's climate. They fed on the waters of life and seeing a mirage was a sure sign of their presence. Sicci were known for being relentless in their pursuit of prey. However, a Patronus charm did not work on them. The Scruta charm could repel it long enough for the caster to escape. Unsurprisingly they looked like a nomadic person of the area, swaddled all in black.

The last and the one that worried Harry as he stared out the window was the Tragoloths, who drained the very magic from a wizard, were heralded by unexpected rainfall. Tragoloths were black winged-fedora-hat-wearing-empty-looking trench coats that flew around. They could drain from a distance and from mouth-to-mouth contact like the Dementor. To be 'kissed' by a Tragoloth was to lose all of your magical core, otherwise your magical power was stolen and gave you an aged appearance until your core replenished itself.

“How good are you at learning new spells, Hermione?” Harry asked, watching lightning streak across the sky.

Hermione cast him an affronted look. “I’m not stupid.”

“Good,” Harry said, passing her the book and pointed at the Latin incantation. “You need to learn the ME Charm... err... Magical Essence. The incantation is Magica Esse. You swish your wand three times to the left in quick succession to cast it. You’ll know you did it right if you feel suddenly lighter and a silver bubble forms around you.”

“Oh come on, Harry,” Hermione said disdainfully, pushing the book away from her. “You can’t honestly believe the rain is being caused by a Tragoloth. They’re not even native to this country.”

“They’re nomadic,” Harry argued, pushing the book at her. “At least read about it.”

Hermione sniffed and took the book from him. Harry watched her for a minute before pulling his wand from his pocket and practiced the charm continuously without results. The train wheels screeched violently and the cabin swerved to the right upsetting Harry and Hermione’s balance. Suddenly the cabin lights went out and the lurching forward momentum halted.

Screams broke out in the front of the train causing Harry to leap up and barricade their cabin door with a locking charm. Hermione pulled herself up from the floor and cast a fearful glance at the discarded D.A.D.A book and then at Harry. She was white as a ghost.

“We have to go help the younger students!” she cried, raising her wand at the door.

Harry grabbed her arm and shouted, “NO!”

Hermione jumped at the contact and pulled away from him. “We know how to--”

“NO,” Harry repeated firmly. “We’re not leaving this cabin. It’s not safe in the corridor.”

“Get out of my way!” Hermione shrieked hysterically and cast a body binding hex on him.

Harry fell to the floor and mentally cursed as he watched helpless as Hermione broke his locking charm and scurried out into danger. Wasting no time, he focused on his magical core and yanked it through his blood stream. Kids were screaming fearfully throughout the train. He concentrated harder on forcing his magic to break her hex. Hermione had cast a particularly strong hex though, and by the time he broke it and made it out of the cabin, he could see Hermione desperately trying to cast the ME Charm at a group of them.

He saw one girl in the clutches of an empty black raincoat figure and cast the charm at her. The leather winged beast dropped her and turned eerily towards him. Harry gasped, feeling his magic well up and burst across his skin as a heavy presence centered over his chest. It took him two tries with the Tragoloth focused on him but he managed to cast the charm and immediately the weighty feeling evaporated and he felt light as a feather.

“Expecto Patronum,” Harry cast, hoping the presence of a Patronus could run interference between the students and the Borsalino-Fedora-wearing Tragoloths as a happiness/energy boost.

Prongs burst free of his wand and ran rampant around the corridor. It's presence cast a golden light over the area allowing Harry to see better. The silver shimmer of his ME Shield lit the direct immediate area even brighter than the Patronus. He heard frantic calls of Expecto Patronum up and down the train, but didn't take the time to see if they were successful because he could see Hermione struggling under the weight of three of them.

“Magica Esse!” Harry cried out pointing his wand at Hermione who was falling to the ground, trying her best to protect three second years while failing to protect herself.

Harry sprinted towards them and grabbed her arm. He jerked her upright and turned her towards him. He shook her hard and yelled, “You stupid woman! Don't let me ever catch you doing something so foolhardy a bloody Gryffindor would do again!”

Hermione's pale complexion turned splotchy red and her limp silver hair bristled as anger raced through her. "I couldn't not help the kids! They can't perform anything near as complex and draining as a ME Charm!"

Harry growled and pointed his wand at the three Hermione had been protecting. "Magica Esse! Magica Esse! Magica Esse!"

Three silver shields burst into place over the frightened children. Their complexion immediately pinked and the tired lines around their eyes started fading. They started whispering to each other excitedly, but Harry ignored them, searching for more of the dark creatures.

"Why are they attacking the train?" Hermione asked, gripping her wand tighter and stepping in front of the three kids. Harry could tell that her hair was changing back to normal, albeit, slowly.

Instead of answering, Harry rushed forward and swished his wand three times. He said nothing through it all as he expended his energy to protect the others. Prongs came prancing forward and surprisingly so did a few other Patroni. He whispered a fierce command at them and fought onward through the cluster of Tragoloths.

He sent newly protected youngsters to the back of the train, telling them to search for the Headgirl and she'd help them. Finally, Harry made it to the front of the train, feeling utterly exhausted as his shield spluttered and died. He collapsed against the wall, his sweaty bangs sticking to his forehead and getting into his eyes. He panted heavily and yelled out for his brother, who he hadn't seen in all of this.

"DANIEL!" Harry called again and heard a faint voice two cabins ahead of him and to the left.

A hoard of Tragoloths huddled in front of the door amidst the shadows. Harry struggled to his feet and aimed his wand again feeling the heavy weight settle over his chest as he approached them. He cast Prongs again watching as it parted them and dove through their beating wings into the cabin. He found his brother looking about 65 and quickly cast a ME at him.

Daniel perked up under the charm and grabbed Harry. Startled, Harry did nothing as his brother jerked him forward and to the side. He landed painfully against the seat and the wall. It hurt to breath and spots were dancing in front of his eyes. He didn't know if it was because of what Daniel had done or because of the six Tragoloths trying to get into the cabin at them. He shot another ME before he collapsed completely. Distantly and very dimly he heard Daniel cast a Patronus and a ME before his sight failed and he faded out of consciousness.

When Harry awoke, the train lights were on and the train was hurtling forward at a pace which reminded Harry of the speed it took on after the Dementors had left third year. Obviously the conductor was wishing right at this moment that he had another day job. Harry wouldn't be surprised if the poor guy asked for early retirement. As it was, he ached all over and there was a large goose egg at the back of his head.

"You passed out," Daniel said, looking like he was in his early thirties instead of mid sixties.

"Why'd they leave?" Harry grunted, sitting upright and placing a hand to his head. His scar throbbed horribly.

"I took care of them," Daniel mentioned too casually.

Harry looked up his green eyes narrowing. "Oh, really?"

"Yes, I've been battling them non-stop, didn't you know? I've been seen doing battle all up and down the train. The firsties are all excited to have been rescued by the great Daniel Potter."

Harry climbed to his feet slowly, leveling a glare at his brother. "You never change do you, Daniel?"

Daniel raised his eyebrows. "Let's hope I never do. Can't have the savior of the wizarding world be cowardly. I have an image to maintain."

"Too right, you prat," Harry grumbled, and exited the compartment to walk to the end of the train.

He came upon Hermione, bending over to comfort a Hufflepuff 3rd year, judging by his robes and in doing so presented a very lovely backside. Harry noted that her hair was back to it's bushy self, but when she turned around he could see how aged she still was. She looked to be in her late forties and was eerily reminiscent of McGonagall. Harry walked toward her warily and stopped in front of her. She was looking at her feet and fiddling with her wand. He saw Hermione sneak a glance up at him from under her lashes and he grinned a very tired lopsided smile.

"Look, it's Daniel!" said one Gryffindor second year to a bunch of others in his year.

Harry looked over at them and frowned while Hermione did the same.

"He's back to normal already! Wow!" said the Hufflepuff girl he'd rescued earlier.

A couple of four and fifth years peeked out of their cabins and shot him a look before disappearing chatting excitedly to their companions.

"Daniel Potter looks like himself again!"

"Those Tragoloths never stood a chance against him!"

"That takes loads of raw power to be able to recover like that! Mum and Da say that only Dumbledore is capable of recovering that quickly!"

"Cor, that's amazing!"

"Well he is the Boy-Who-Lived after all!"

"Think Daniel would like to snog in a broom cupboard with me tonight? He's so dreamy."

Harry pursed his lips and started to turn away when he saw Hermione turn around the opposite way and open her mouth. He slapped his hand over her mouth and Hermione struggled frantically for a moment, but quieted upon seeing it was him.

“Let it go,” Harry said urgently, before dropping his hand.

Hermione looked undecided for a moment but she nodded finally and followed him back to their cabin all the while shooting glares at those praising the Boy-Who-Lived. As soon as the door to their cabin closed, shutting them away from the other students, Hermione rounded on him. She looked cute when she was irate, Harry thought tiredly and sank into the seat.

“Why didn’t you let me correct the idiots?” Hermione yelled, putting her hands on her hips and suddenly looking ten years younger.

“What good would it do?” he answered, closing his eyes.

“What good? What good!” she screeched loudly making his temples throb. “Your brother is getting credit for something you did! You need to tell everyone the truth Harry!”

“Could you scream a little quieter, Hermione?” Harry begged, lying down on his stomach. “I’ve got a headache.”

Hermione stopped ranting and sat down meekly. She wore a confused expression on her face as if uncertain about her acquisition. Harry took off his spectacles and pillowed his head on his arms and yawned. He pressed his aching scar to the coolness of the plastic cushion and sighed in relief.

“How far are we from Hogsmeade?”

“About twenty minutes,” Hermione answered quietly, pulling Crookshanks into her lap. “You should get into your school robes, Harry.”

“In a few minutes,” he murmured, closing his eyes in relief. “Can you wake me when we’re almost there?”

Hermione agreed, pulling her legs up underneath her and petted Crookshanks. She watched him silently before softly, she whispered, “Thanks, Harry.”

“Mmmm,” he murmured, absently.

It seemed like no time at all when Hermione was shaking him awake. Harry pried his eyes open and grunted at the brightness of the cabin lights. He sat up carefully and replaced his spectacles back onto the bridge of his nose.

Hermione was already in her robes as Harry collected his own and tossed them over his head, not bothering to get dressed in full student gear. The train was pulling into the station by the time he was done and Harry obligingly pulled down Hermione's trunk before he took down his own.

Crookshanks was back in his carrier and soon the cat and Hermione were gone from the carriage. Harry looked up at the shelf and waited for Serion to come down. When he didn't come down after a few minutes, Harry sat his trunk upright against the wall and stood up on the seat.

§You doing okay there, mate?§ Harry asked, taking in Serion's tightly coiled form.

§Bloody terrific, thanks,§ came the little snake's response.

Amused, Harry asked, *§Going to come on down then?§*

§Is the wretched beast gone?§

§Crookshanks?§ Harry asked through a smile. *§Yeah, he and Hermione left the cabin a few minutes ago.§*

Serion uncoiled and said curtly, *§I'll be right down.§*

Serion was soon wrapped tightly around his arm. Harry picked up his trunk and exited the train. The crowd bustled over to the carriages as Hagrid called out to the dazed and confused first years. Dumbledore stood at the end of the station like a beacon and overused symbol of strength and power of good. His presence worked however and the once frightened first years drew themselves upright and followed Hagrid proudly to the lake opposite the town.

Packed easily into an empty carriage, Harry watched the scenery change as his carriage drew up to the Great Hall. The town gave way

to forest which lasted for most of the ride until finally melting into the grounds of the school. Serion complained nonstop the whole ride about the Thestrals carrying them forward until Harry finally snapped at him.

Currently Serion was sulking, squeezing Harry's arm a little to tight every now and then to show his displeasure with him. Harry ignored the almost painful sensation and alighted from the carriage as soon as it rolled to a stop. He opened his trunk and removed the Restricted Section books hurrying into the entrance hall.

Harry ignored the hubbub that was surrounding his brother and raced behind the third set of armor. He tapped the metal foot twice and whispered 'sneezewart' and whipped behind the drapery of a field of dragons located next to the suit. Winding his way as fast as possible, Harry located the back entrance to the Restricted Section in the Hogwarts school library.

Carefully, he opened the panel and stuck his head out. A quick glance revealed Madam Pince cataloguing in the Herbology section and cautiously slid out of the passageway. He unshrunk the books and replaced them where he found them. As he was about to leave, Harry realized he'd almost forgot to retrieve the pamphlets from the advance animagus book and hurried back.

Sighing with relief at not being caught, he shut the passageway and walked back to the front hall. Slipping out once more, Harry made sure the drapery was in place before walking into the hall. The first years were just arriving and their excited chatter amused Harry to no end. A week from now they'd be complaining about how much work it took to do magic.

He entered the Great Hall and sat down at the Ravenclaw table and wished for the first years to hurry up and get sorted. He was very hungry. They scuffled in and after a short little song about the houses from the Sorting Hat, one by one sat upon the three legged stool.

The first one went into Slytherin, the second into Ravenclaw, and so on. Harry clapped for those in his house and wished Dumbledore would get his little speech over with so that they could eat. As if he

had read Harry's thoughts, Dumbledore stood up, sweeping his beard over his shoulder, and called out to the hall.

"Welcome... to another year at Hogwarts!"

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 4°«««°»»»°

Chapter 5

Harry woke early the next morning and showered. He didn't bother trying to make his hair lie flat and simply brushed his teeth before heading downstairs. He traveled the hallways and staircases easily, having traversed them often in the past. Avoiding the Great Hall, Harry took the door to the right of the main staircase in the entrance hall.

All along the way paintings of food were being eaten by hungry portraits and animals from the upper floors. Harry watched in fascination for a moment at a young girl eating like a cow before shaking his head and briskly walking down a flight of stone steps into a wide corridor with gaily flickering torches. He came to a halt in front of a still life painting of a bowl of fruit halfway down and tickled the pear. Harry grabbed the handle it transfigured into and swept into the Hogwarts kitchens.

"Good morning, Mr. Potter," squeaked a house elf name Swibby, hurrying over.

"Morning, Swibby, can I get something to eat?"

Swibby nodded eagerly and suddenly Harry was being ushered forward by several house elves, all twittering excitedly. He was given freshly made rashers of scrambled eggs, kippers, and bacon. A plate of pancakes and waffles followed, along with fresh milk and orange juice. Wizarding cereal boxes filled the table and despite Harry's protests that he was very full they kept bringing him more.

Personally, Harry felt he was lucky to have made it out of there alive. The elves were always so determined to make him explode from the inside out by stuffing him until he burst. Harry went back up to the entrance hall and ducked into the Great Hall to pick up his schedule from his Head of House, Professor Flitwick, who was eating his breakfast with Snape at the head table.

"Morning Professor," Harry said politely, stepping up in front of the little half-man half-goblin. "Could I get my schedule if it's not too much trouble?"

Harry felt Snape's eyes on him and briefly met the older man's eyes before focusing more firmly on Flitwick. If Snape's glare could kill, Harry would have keeled over where he stood. Flitwick squeaked heartily and ignored Snape's death glare while grabbing from his satchel his students' schedules.

"I'm afraid my hands are still sticky," Professor Flitwick said, holding them out awkwardly between his palms. "Take them and get yours."

Harry took the stack from his Head of House and started rifling through them. He mentally snorted at Hermione's overloaded schedule. How that girl thought taking every N.E.W.T. class offered would help her, he didn't know. Harry shifted back further and found his nestled between Patil and Prachet.

"Thank you, Professor," he said, putting the rest down on the table before him. "Goodbye."

Flitwick beamed. "Goodbye!"

As Harry walked away he heard Snape sneer to Flitwick, "That Potter boy is up to something..." Harry snorted mentally, of course he was up to something, he was going to steal potion ingredients right out from under the Potion Master's nose. Snape just didn't know it yet.

Harry thought his schedule was utterly ridiculous. Transfigurations, Charms, and Potions on Mondays and Wednesdays and every alternate Friday? Transfigurations and Potions together on the same day! He couldn't believe his rotten luck. Then he had Ancient Runes, Defense Against the Dark Arts, and Arithmancy on Tuesdays and Thursdays and every alternate Friday.

He made his way back to the Ravenclaw tower and crashed into Hermione as she was coming down. Harry fell down on his arse from the impact and Hermione squealed in horror.

"Merlin! I'm so sorry, Harry!" Hermione exclaimed, reaching down to help him up and hit him with her overloaded backpack.

"Ow!" Harry yelped, rubbing his head where the bag had smacked him when it fell down her arm.

“Oh goodness,” Hermione murmured apologetically as Harry climbed to his feet.

“Trying to get rid of the competition for top student already, Hermione?” Harry asked teasingly, clutching his schedule tighter as he rubbed his head with the same hand.

Hermione turned red and opened her mouth to reply scathingly when Harry cut her off with a knowing grin. “You were trying to kill me off weren’t you!”

“I was not!”

Harry enjoyed her flush for another minute before smirking and walking away up the stairs to their house.

“I was not!” Hermione shrieked, stomping her foot several stairs below him.

Harry tossed a lopsided grin over his shoulder. “Keep saying that Hermione, and maybe I’ll believe it. See you in Transfigurations! Try not to kill anybody before then!”

“You’re such a prat, Harry Potter!”

Harry chuckled and took the stairs two at a time, winding his way to the top. A stern librarian looked at him from her frame. She had horn-rimmed glasses with peacock feathers in her hair. Harry nodded to her as he gave the password, ookkee, from the word bookkeepers, and glided into the common room.

He saw Luna Lovegood petting an odd looking owl as she collected the newest edition of the Quibbler from it. A few other students were up and about. Ravenclaws, as a whole they liked to get up early and get the day started and work accomplished.

Harry took the right stairway and walked up to the boy’s dormitories and walked into the one labeled 7th year. He saw Serion basking in the puddle of sunlight that struck his bedspread and quickly pulled the hangings shut so the others didn’t see the snake and react badly to it.

Serion hissed unintelligibly, already taking a nap for the morning. Harry knew the snake liked to sleep more than once during the day.

Grabbing his satchel, Harry opened his trunk and stuffed in it the books and things he'd need for the day's classes. He placed the preshrunk potions kit carefully in the side pocket, and the three textbooks he'd be carrying in on the other. A couple of ink wells, several quills, three rolls of parchment, and three notebooks later and he was ready to go.

§*Later, Serion,*§ Harry called after checking the others in his dormitory had gone into the shower or downstairs.

Serion raised his head and hissed angrily, §*Stop talking or you'll ruin a perfectly good dream.*§

Harry retorted, his voice laced with sarcasm, §*A thousand apologies.*§

Not bothering to see what the response to that would be, Harry ducked back downstairs and started making his way back to the main areas of the castle. He had Transfiguration first, and with Professor McGonagall, he couldn't afford to be late. Especially because of how she acted towards him; it was like her panties were in a twist. He wasn't sure if she had wanted both Potter twins in her house or if she was upset that Harry was better than Daniel in her class.

McGonagall was standing beside her desk when Harry walked into her classroom. She didn't acknowledge him, merely continued to watch the door for more students. Harry didn't let it bother him and sat down at a table to the right of the classroom. He pulled out a notebook, a quill and well set, and his textbook and put them in front of him.

He started rereading the textbook, *Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Transfigurations* by Pollygonna Patterson. He was so absorbed reading the chapter about animagi that he didn't notice the first or second bell ring. The chattering students never penetrated his thoughts either. Harry did hear however, Professor McGonagall call the class to order and looked up surprised. He quickly set aside the

textbook and snatched up his quill readying himself to do some note taking.

“Now that I have all of your attention, class. This is your N.E.W.T. year and I expect you all to do your best for them. They are what their title implies, so I suggest you do your class work and your outside schoolwork with enthusiasm and hard work. The rules of my class are stricter, the assignments more time-consuming, and my grading harsher. If you thought 5th year was bad, then you might reconsider taking Transfigurations as a N.E.W.T. level course. By the end of the week, this offer is no longer available. Shall we get right to it?”

Harry wrote furiously as Professor McGonagall went on to lecturing about turning a wombat into a sugar glider. Later during the double period, they got to practice on imported wombats. McGonagall had asked Hermione to pass them out. She'd given one to everybody but Harry when she was done and Harry wrinkled his nose in disgust.

Back to normal.

He didn't bother to raise his hand and ask for one, instead he silently sent an *accio* at the remaining creature and flew it over to his desk. It took several tries and a few rereads on the lesson from his notes before he got it right. The sugar glider was disgustingly cute and very tiny. How he had ended up making a baby one, Harry wasn't too sure, but he did do it and looked over at McGonagall.

But Professor McGonagall wasn't paying attention seeing as all of her attention was on Hermione who was biting her lip in frustration. Harry watched her wand movements for a few moments before turning back to his desk and playing with the fuzz ball he'd transfigured.

Harry transfigured his inkwell into a foam ball for the sugar glider. He watched the little critter run after the ball before it tired itself out and fell asleep. It was just as well because the dismissal bell rang and it was time to pack up.

“Since nobody was able to correctly transfigure his or her wombat before the end of the class, I expect a 2 foot scroll to be written on what you were doing wrong.”

Groans were heard round about the class at her announcement and Harry rolled his eyes.

"Figures," Harry muttered, banishing his sugar glider back into the box not bothering to untransfigure the thing. Let McGonagall try and figure out who did it.

"I also expect from you lot at least 3 hours of practice or until you are proficient with the spell. The wombats will be available after scheduled class hours. You are dismissed."

Harry trotted after the rest of the Ravenclaws out of the classroom and watched with bemusement as several broke off and headed out to Care of Magical Creatures. Professor Hagrid was nice and all, but Harry couldn't believe anybody would be foolish enough to take his class considering what he thought to be cute and cuddly, let alone a Ravenclaw.

Through a crowd of students up ahead, Harry saw Hermione walking quickly with her head down. She, like he himself, was probably headed to the Charms classroom. He also figured she was muttering the incantation and waving her wand in hoping to have the spell mastered by the end of the day.

Not bothering to catch up with her, Harry walked along through the herd of students rushing to their next class and tried to find the quickest way to do that. Doing that of course took a lot of luck since the classes moved around as did the stairwells and most secret passages. When the rush of the first week died down, most of the classrooms stayed on the same corridor, but not always. Of course, the smart student would have mastered a point me spell and do as Harry was doing, consulting with it and maneuvering his way steadily through the halls of Hogwarts.

He reached the classroom in plenty of time to locate a seat close to the podium his Head of House taught from. Stacked on the stool beside it were tons of books that the short Professor stood on. Hermione walked in behind a gaggle of girls from Gryffindor and it was then that Harry realized this class was a double house class.

“Great,” Harry said out loud, folding his arms over his textbook and resting his chin on them. “Just what I need, seeing and hearing my brother before lunch.”

Most of the class was mingling amongst each other when Flitwick called them to order. He climbed up onto his stack of books and proceeded to lecture everybody about the importance of N.E.W.T.s and what was to be expected of them. This Harry tuned out taking the time to plot against Snape and figure out how to get into his hoard of potion supplies.

Harry’s attention was diverted from his devious task when Professor Flitwick cleared his throat and said, “We’re going to go a little off schedule and cover something that we weren’t going to cover until after Professor Hobday went over them in his class.”

Flitwick looked around at them, his face suddenly a little grimmer. “If it weren’t for the efforts of Daniel Potter here, a little girl would have died from the attack on the train.”

At this Daniel ducked his head trying to look modest beside Ron as the gaggle of girls that had followed Hermione inside swooned in delight and a few other Gryffindor boys reached over and patted him on the back.

“Professor Dumbledore thought it would be beneficial for you to know how to deal with them. Does anybody know the type of creature that attacked the train?”

Hermione raised her hand immediately and Harry mentally snorted.

“Yes, Miss Granger?” Flitwick asked eagerly.

“Tragoloths, sir. They are deviations of the Lethifold and instead of sucking consciousness and eating flesh, they snack on a witch or wizard’s magic. If they get the chance, like a Dementor, they will try to kiss you. Their kiss will steal your magical core however instead of your soul.”

“Very good, Miss Granger, 10 points to Ravenclaw.”

Hermione beamed and opened her notebook to tally the points in her running log. She liked to keep track of how much points she earned Harry knew, and even went so far as to categorize them by class and cross-categorize by week and theme. It was almost as if she was trying to set and beat her own personal records.

“Does anybody know how to fend off a Tragoloth?”

Daniel tentatively raised his hand and Professor Flitwick called on him. “I used the incantations Expecto Patronum and Magica Esse, sir.”

“Partially true,” Flitwick said, nodding. “5 points to Gryffindor. The Patronus charm doesn’t actually work against the Tragoloth. The use of it however in the skirmish was a good idea to boost the morale of those fighting.”

Ron looked upset at the number of points awarded and was turning an infamous Weasley red as Harry looked on. Daniel was practically preening under the female attention that Parvati, Lavender, and Jessica gave him so adoringly. Some boys from both houses were looking on with envy.

Harry took notes finally when his Head of House got to lecturing. He took careful notes when Flitwick got around to explaining why and how the Magical Essence Shield worked. They then broke off into pairs and practiced.

Daniel made a translucent silver shield on his first try and Flitwick remarked that it must have been the adrenaline of what was happening on the train that pushed it to completion. Hermione made a slightly more solid shield and Harry with three stabs of his wand produced a flawless shield in one go. Professor Flitwick didn’t see it and Harry let it drop.

Students were beginning to form faint shields by the end of the period and Professor Flitwick assigned them an foot-long essay due by the end of the week on how the ME Shield Charm was designed to tackle the Tragoloth and how that differed from the Patronus Charm working against a Dementor.

It was time for lunch and every student was shoving their way out the door to get to their house table before the food was all eaten. Every hallway was jammed with kids from first years to seventh years trying to navigate to the Great Hall. Harry saw Draco picking on some third year and silently sent a tripping hex his way as he passed by the Slytherin.

The Great Hall was crowded and very noisy. Harry could see Ron and Daniel picking up food from the table and stuffing it in their mouths as they made their way to their seats. Hermione was buried in a book with a sandwich in front of her untouched. Luna was dreamily sitting across from her with her new Quibbler upside down.

Harry decided to sit next to them and plopped his book bag beside Hermione's on the floor. He sat down on the bench and started grabbing food from the nearby dishes. Neither girl glanced his way as he heaped ridiculous quantities of fish and chips on his plate. He took a couple of dill pickles and placed them on the side then poured himself a tall glass of pumpkin juice to go with his meal.

As he ate, Harry glanced thoughtfully up at the head table. His eyes met Professor Snape's momentarily before he smirked and looked away. He knew just how dismal potions was going to be this year, but he'd get even with the greasy git. The best way to do that was to steal from his storage cupboard. The mystery would drive the man crazy.

First he'd need a good distraction during class time. Harry chewed his fish for a minute in contemplation of a good distraction. Then it came to him. He glanced carefully out of the corner of his eyes at Hermione who was reading up on their potions book trying to memorize it all before class so she could earn their house points. Fat chance at that, Harry thought.

With the distraction in place, Harry pondered over how he'd get to the cupboard and break the wards around it without alerting Snape. He'd have to analyze the wards again, because he was sure Snape had altered them from the last time he broke into the cupboard. Then he'd have to get in, steal the ingredients, get out, replace the wards, and get back to his seat. From there he'd have to hide the evidence and hurry his potion along so that it'd be on track with everyone else's.

Harry left the Great Hall when he was done eating and made his way to the library to collect some reading material for his essays assigned earlier that morning. Madam Pince watched him beadily, making Harry extremely uncomfortable. She'd never bothered with him before so why was she glaring at him now? Shaking off the irritable itch between his shoulders, Harry browsed the aisles and finally selected three books for the essays. Madam Pince begrudgingly stamped the books out and gave them to him and Harry scurried down to the dungeons as fast as he could.

Professor Snape's class was the only class Harry sat himself down in the back and not in the front. The reason for this was because Snape was an evil arse who took pleasure in insulting Harry by telling the whole class how he wanted to be like his arrogant brother and have all the fame.

The potion lab was empty upon his arrival and Harry knew why too. Nobody liked to be in Professor Snape's class longer than they absolutely had to be. Many would show up just as the final bell rang and try to sneak into their seats.

Harry set his stuff down on the table before him and unpacked his potions kit. He waved his wand and silently cast the unshrinking spell. His cauldron and ingredients grew and grew and grew until Harry cut the spell off with a flick of his wrist. Best have all "wand-waving" finished with before class started considering Snape's dim view on the subject.

Harry grabbed an abused lime green notebook from his bag and opened to a fresh page. He labeled the top with the date, school year, and title of the potion. Then he copied furiously all the instructions from the board onto the clean blank pages. Afterwards he double-checked to make sure he didn't miss a line anywhere.

Next Harry flipped the textbook to the correct pages on the potion, which was Lulijuice and double checked the instructions he wrote down. Snape was known to purposefully switch one little thing that would ruin the potion. Other times he placed improvements in the production of the potion. Harry used the remaining time before class

to figure out which was which and make sure that his instructions were as perfect as they could be.

The class was filing in and Harry noted with a wince that he shared it with Hufflepuffs. The Badgers were notorious for exploding more cauldrons on a daily basis than Neville Longbottom in a year. Harry could just see the destruction now as he eyed Justin Finch-Fletchley and Ernie Macmillan taking their positions near the front of the class.

The rest paired up and sat down, leaving Harry by himself in the back. Hannah Abbott and Susan Bones sat with Hermione at the other desk in the front row. Terry Boot and Anthony Goldstein sat behind them and started unpacking their things. He was okay with this as he wasn't too sure he'd want to be paired with a Hufflepuff. Now Hermione on the other hand, wouldn't make a bad partner but she'd already tripled up with two other girls. Her friends, Padma and Su, were nowhere to be seen and Harry guessed correctly that the pair were with Professor Butterworth in N.E.W.T. Muggle Studies.

The doors banged open behind him and Harry mentally rolled his eyes. The dramatic entrances were getting old. Snape immediately launched into the importance of N.E.W.T. level potions. He went on to describe how his course would be extremely difficult this year and that he had the rights to throw out any he found wanting. At the last, Snape had met his eyes and smirked at him.

Harry resisted the urge to give him a finger and pasted a bored look on his face. Snape's eyes narrowed and Harry felt a prickling sensation behind his left eye. Dropping his gaze, Harry immediately felt better.

"Great," Harry muttered aloud. "The git must be getting laser vision."

"What was that Potter?" Snape sneered next to him. "Trying to stand out from your brother again?"

"I said nothing, Professor."

"Then you will get started on the Lulijuice, Potter," Snape returned silkily and glided back to the front of the classroom.

The other students took this as their cue to unpack and get started. Harry stood up to go to the student storage cupboard and get out the ingredients for the potion. He grabbed lacewing flies, sappy weed, mandagora leaves, green-glider skin, and squid ink. As he passed by the Hermione's table flashed a grin her way and headed on past to the back.

Deftly organizing his ingredients in accordance to order of placement into the potion, Harry got everything ready. He read over the first few lines of instructions from his notebook and grabbed a knife. With ease, Harry chopped the green-glider skin into sickle size pieces before setting it aside. He ran his finger down the page and found the next set of preparation lines and set to work. He shredded the sappy weed, ground the mandagora leaves, measured out a half-vial of squid ink, and chopped lacewing flies.

By the time Harry was done with prep work, the classroom was filled with pale pastel colored smoke. Hermione's was blue whereas the two girls at her table and the those two tables back had yellow and Ernie and Justin had pink. Harry shook his head, wondering how on earth some of the students had made it into Snape's N.E.W.T. class.

Harry poured in his base and added two beakers of water and set the potion to boil. The minute it started boiling, Harry took it off the flame and carefully stirred green-glider skin in, one piece at a time. His potion emitted cerulean colored fumes once he set it back onto the burner.

Sappy weed he just tossed in to let it stew for fifteen minutes while he stirred anti-clockwise the whole time. He didn't let up on the motion and the potion started to swirl. It turned a deep sea green and Harry knew he was doing good. He strained the weed out and poured the finely powdered mandagora leaves into the cauldron. Twelve minutes on a low simmer later and Harry was mixing the squid ink into the potion and watching as it turned yellow-green.

Harry had one final ingredient to place into his potion and ten minutes before he could do it. In the downtime he wrote his observations from the process down at the end of the written instructions. Harry detected movement to his left and looked up sharply. Snape was

peering down into his cauldron, his long beaky nose practically in the bubbling liquid. Harry held his breath.

If one thing was even slightly off, Snape would *evanesco* the whole cauldron and give Harry a zero for the day. He'd then take points off and attempt to assign him a detention. He let out a sigh of relief when Snape grudgingly walked away down another aisle to torment some Hufflepuffs.

Near the end of the lesson, Harry added the lacewing flies and placed a stopper in a sample vial of his potion. He then snuck a beaker full of his potion into his potions kit before Snape saw and *evanesced* the rest away. He cleaned up his area and carefully took his potion ingredients to the front.

After Hermione had stopped a vial of her potion he set his plan into motion. From across the room by the student store cupboard, Harry cast a silent *wingardium levioso* on a jar of dung beetles with his wand and sent it her way. Hermione backed right into the floating jar and it toppled over into Susan Bones' potion just before she cleared it away. The results were immediate.

A large boom echoed throughout the room as Susan's potion exploded. The girls and Professor Snape were coated in thick yellow slime and it didn't take long for Snape to start yelling at them. Harry ran over to Snape's personal stores and started analyzing his wards.

Four tense minutes later, Harry got them unwound and the cupboard opened without alerting the still ranting Potions Master. Quickly scanning the shelves Harry started to cast multiple *accios* on the items he needed and stuffed them into his robes. In under two minutes he had enough stolen ingredients to make both animagus potions and quickly shut the cupboard door.

He was sweating now, and had to wipe his face with the sleeve of his robe before setting the wards back up. Harry's spectacles were fogging because of his heavy breathing by the time he was done. Shortly after he was slinging his backpack over his shoulder and sprinting down the hallway to dinner, his heart hammering wildly the whole way. The best laid plans were always the most obvious.

0««0»»»0End Chapter 50««0»»»0

Chapter 6

The first month went by in a blur as Harry set up shop to brewing the first of two animagus potions in a very remote location. Nobody would want to deal with Moaning Myrtle to get here and despite being a very crazy and creepy girl ghost, she wasn't bad company.

Moaning Myrtle drifted in the air beside him, looking down at the potion that he was brewing. As it turned out, she'd been fascinated by potions when she was in school. Unfortunately for her, that particular fascination caused most of her social problems.

To Harry it sounded like she had suffered from the same lank hair and oily acne prone skin that had caused Snape all of his troubles during Hogwarts from his father and uncles. Because of the similar sob-story, Harry had made sure that while brewing the Potential potion that he covered his hair with an old rag and took multiple showers afterwards to keep clean of oils and smells.

"How much longer until you finish this potion, Harry?" Myrtle queried, peering up at him over her round spectacles while running her fingers through the cauldron and out the other side.

Harry pushed his slipping glasses up his nose and picked up the pamphlet and scanned the remaining instructions. He compared the status of his potion to where it was suppose to be and sighed. Harry mutely shook his head.

"No idea, I have to fix the potion or scrap it and start over."

Moaning Myrtle nodded sympathetically and scratched at her chin. "What's wrong? Did you miss a timing?"

"No," Harry said, frowning thoughtfully down at the bubbling cauldron.

Myrtle looked miserable and started moaning it was all her fault and somehow brought Olive Hornby into her wailing. Harry shushed her gently, if a bit impatiently, and took out his potions notebook from his schoolbag beside him on the floor. He flipped to the section in the back containing his notes on the potion and ran his fingers down the

list of observations, pausing to check every now and then against the pamphlet.

"Aha!" Harry said, flashing Myrtle a quick grin. "I know where it went wrong, Myrtle. It wasn't timing, so don't fuss. I made the mistake, but luckily it should only take about five days to fix it, and then another ten days after that to get this potion where it's useable for the ritual."

Myrtle nodded morosely at him before getting up and wandering around the large cavern. Harry glanced up momentarily to watch her scrutinize the large giant snake sculpture in the middle of the water. When she had followed him down here for the first time, she'd been curious to see what he was up to as well as finding out what the young Voldemort could have been doing.

It took her a while to get to use to the chamber. A month ago when he had first started brewing, Myrtle had tried to convince him that neither girls nor professors ever came to her toilet unless she caused problems. She'd even offered to stop flooding the toilets and sinks if Harry would brew the potion up in her lavatory instead of down here, where she knew her killer had lived. Reluctantly she agreed to potion watch down in the Chamber of Secrets when he'd threatened to go elsewhere.

After all, what good was a secret chamber if nobody used it? Besides, down here it was safe, because the password to the entrance was in Parseltongue. As Harry was the only Parselmouth in Europe besides Voldemort, it was a pretty good bet that nobody could accidentally stumbled upon the potion. Harry wasn't going to take chances on being found out or the potion going to ruin by contamination.

The night waned and when Harry had added the boiled salstrak eyes to the mucky potion, he was exhausted and very hungry. He had been in the Chamber of Secrets since before dinner and it was after two in the morning by his watch. He cleaned up, pulled the rag off of his head and stuffed it into his pocket.

"Going already?" Moaning Myrtle sighed sadly, a frown etched firmly on her face.

"Yeah," Harry said, slinging his backpack over his shoulder and walking to the entrance pipe. "It's late and I can't risk Mrs. Norris or Filch catching me."

"When are you coming back?" Myrtle asked, floating dejectedly beside him.

Harry shrugged and spoke the word '*stairs*' in Parseltongue. He started climbing the steps after they formed with a hair blowing rush of wind. Harry yawned widely, cracking his jaw as he made his way back to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom on the second floor. There weren't nearly as many steps as there should have been, considering how far down below the school they were suppose to be and Harry was glad magic didn't have to make any sense.

He said goodbye to Myrtle at the top and quickly exited from the girls' lavatory. He had a short walk across the castle and five more flights of stairs to climb. Just thinking about it made his head hurt and his body feel heavier and more tired.

Ten minutes later, Harry was trudging through the portrait hole. He ignored the frigid glare coming from the librarian lady. The effect of her glare was ruined by her yawning and slumping against her frame. As the portrait swung shut, he could hear her mutter her displeasure at being awoken at such a miserable hour of the day.

"Where have you been?"

Startled, Harry stopped on the bottom stair leading to the boys' dormitory. He glanced over his shoulder and spied Hermione over by the couches in front of the fire. Her hair was a wild tangled frizzy mess and her large brown eyes blinking sleepers away. She looked like she'd just had sex.

"What are you doing up?"

Hermione shot him a glare and began to straighten her stacks of scrolls and scraps of parchment. "Don't start with me, Harry. I know you've been running around after hours."

Harry eyed her warily. "It's none of your business, Hermione. I suggest you go get some sleep."

"I am Headgirl," Hermione stated firmly, standing up from the couch with her hands on her hips. "It is my business and if you don't tell me, I'll go get Professor Flitwick."

"Library," Harry lied, keeping his face stoic.

"The library's closed."

Harry shrugged. "So?"

She spluttered, "Are you telling me--"

"Yes," he replied, staring her down.

"Twenty points from Ravenclaw for being in the library after hours! Ten more for wandering the halls after curfew!"

Harry raised an eyebrow and said witheringly, "Is that all?"

"No!" Hermione fairly growled. "You will serve one week of detentions to be carried out under Filch!"

Harry nodded sharply, turned, and sprinted up the stairs. He slammed into the dorm ignoring the disgruntled grunts and murmurings from his housemates. He dropped his bag unceremoniously to the ground by his trunk and pulled his shirt over his head. He tossed it to the side and sat down on the trunk, yanking his shoes off furiously.

He stripped to his boxers and flung back the curtains around his bed. Terry Boot was muttering darkly at him, but Harry ignored the gangly pimply teen and jerked the curtains closed. He cast a wandless silencing charm cutting off their grumblings and flopped backwards. Serion hissed menacingly and slithered away from the pillows Harry nearly crushed him against. Harry didn't bother to apologize and laid there staring at the bottom of the mattress above him.

The first thought to penetrate his raging mind was that Hermione Granger was just like everybody else. She was a miserable goody-two-shoes with a penchant for being a bitch. Who cared if her hair smelled like lavender or the way she bit her lip while concentrating made him want to bite it too? Who cared indeed. She was just a nosey bushy-haired Headgirl. Easily a dime a dozen.

Harry fell into a fitful night's sleep and dreamed of Howlers yelling loudly at him with brown bushy hair springing out all over the envelop. They were beating him with books and trying to bite his armpits. He woke with a start the next morning and shivered at the newest nightmare featuring Snape wearing the Headgirl badge and trying to snog him.

He peaked out of the curtains and saw that it was later than he usually woke up by the bright grey-pink light filtering into the window. Harry sighed and flopped back against his pillow. He didn't want to get up and ready himself for Ancient Runes. He sighed again and reluctantly sat up, groping for his glasses and got out of bed.

A quick shower and breakfast later, Harry found himself in the library trying to sneak into the Restricted Section. Madam Pince was eyeing him as she never had before, suspiciously, and Harry wondered about her sudden change in attitude towards him. Instead of getting a chance to pick up some promising books he'd located in the card catalog for his search on Horcruxes, Harry was forced to retreat and run to class so he wouldn't be late.

Professor Babbling was conversing with Hermione when he arrived and he steered away from them. He made his way to the far right near the windows overlooking the Quidditch pitch and sat down. Harry pulled out his texts, *Advanced Rune Translation* and *Magical Hieroglyphs and Logograms*, and began to read.

Hermione sat down next to him just as the last bell rang. He scowled into his book before clearing his face of emotion. She tried to say something to him but he shushed her as Professor Babbling started the slide projector. Harry grabbed a quill and notebook and started scribbling notes on Egyptian runes.

As he wrote, Harry imagined himself in one of the tombs in the Valley of the Kings getting sweaty and dirty and making breakthroughs to rival all those who came before him. It was a nice dream, he thought, finishing a doodle that went alongside his notes of him decked out in field gear. Professor Babbling was switching topics and Harry flipped the page forgetting about being a curse breaker.

Hermione tried to catch his attention but he ignored her and kept his head down taking notes. Just being near her drove him crazy; and not a good crazy either. She was wearing a light flowery perfume that was wrecking havoc with his concentration.

He had nothing to say to her and she certainly had nothing to say to him that he wanted to hear. He had been foolish already around her once. Harry concentrated on blocking her scent out by drawing the runes exactly as they were pictured against the screen.

"Harry--" Hermione tried again.

He didn't respond and she tried one last time. Harry just scribbled the sentence down that Babbling had just said about Sphinxes in relation to warding.

Professor Babbling walked over to their desk and asked, "Would you care to share with the class Miss Granger and Mr. Potter what you two are discussing?"

Hermione went pink and shook her head as the class turned to look at them. Harry shook his head unaffected by the dozen or so pairs of eyes on him. When the ancient runes professor turned around, Hermione sunk low in her chair and brought her scroll to the edge of the table. It looked as if she was trying to hide behind it, but her furious blushing could not go unnoticed.

She was the first to get up and leave as soon as the bell rang for dismissal. Harry stood up slower and leisurely packed his things. Professor Babbling was busy up at the front of the class resetting the slide projector and organizing her note cards for the next class.

He swung his satchel over his shoulder and left the classroom, making his way to Professor Vector's class on the other side of the

school. He dodged the trafficking students and slipped into a secret passageway that cut his trip nearly in half. He came out the other side of the Transfigurations classroom and hurried up three flights of stairs.

Harry came through the door just behind his housemates and took a seat in the front of the classroom. It was the only class he sat deliberately in the front because Professor Vector wrote very small on the chalkboard. Harry looked around the room and saw Hermione at the other desk in the front row. He turned away from her and pulled out a sheaf of papers that consisted of all the equations, observations, thought processes, and references for last week's assignment.

He glanced through it quickly though he knew if something was wrong he wouldn't have time to correct before Professor Vector called for it to be handed in to her. Just as he reached the back of the completed assignment Vector called for them to be sent forward for collection. Harry turned around in his seat and waited for Terry Boot to hand him the stack of papers he was collecting.

Boot reached across the aisle to hand the assignments to Hermione smiling broadly at her as she gladly accepted them. Harry shot a glare at Terry and raised his assignment in the air for Professor Vector. She came by and collected the huge pile in front of Hermione and then his single assignment before returning to her desk in the front.

Class settled down as Vector waved her wand at the board and chalky writing appeared. Many were copying the board, filling the room with the scratching of the quill. Harry cast part of a copy charm on his quill and cast the second half of the charm at the blackboard.

Professor Vector placed the homework into her briefcase and walked back to the podium on Hermione's side of the room. "For the rest of the semester we will be on the topic of Time Turners."

Harry saw Hermione's hand go up and waved frantically in the air. Professor Vector stared hard at her and continued, "I will assume that you all know what a Time Turner is and continue from there."

Hermione's hand went down as her cheeks brightened. Harry refused to feel bad for her. He watched her fidget before he switched his

attention back to his quill. The poor thing was beginning to quiver in exhaustion from copying all the notes.

"The discovery of time travel coincided with the invention of Floo Powder. Garry and Miranda Dangerfield had been contracted through the Ministry of Magic to come up with a powder base way to travel. They went through two thousand bad concoctions and more so-so ones before stumbling inadvertently onto what they've now named Anachromagus Powder. Bit ironic considering Anachromagus means, 'He without Time.'

"The use of a Time Turner ages you faster depending on how far back you go and how frequent you use it. The Dangerfields discovered this to their misfortune when they started to closely examine their invention after providing Floo Express with their fireplace traveling powder. Garry aging prematurely, passed away from natural causes and left behind his wife and daughter. Miranda Dangerfield handed the project over to the Ministry after that and Time Turners found a place within the Department of Mysteries.

"The farthest anybody has traveled back in time is recorded at twenty-three hours. It is theorized that going back further would allow too much possibility for change in the timeline to be allowed by nature. One must never change anything that happened in the past because of the terrible tragic results that are thought to have happened in the experimental stages. Don't place yourself in a conundrum and relatively few things can go wrong before you catch up with the timeline."

The tip of his quill broke from being pressed against the parchment too hard and Harry plucked another quill from his bag hurriedly. He continued to take notes until it felt like his hand was going to fall off and when it was threatening to follow through with it, Vector stopped lecturing. She waved her wand at the board again and it wiped clear of notes. Several students groaned in dismay as another set wrote itself into place.

You are to come up with an arithmancy equation that when applied can build a Time Turner. The student with the equation that can efficiently travel the furthest back in time will win a top of the line

Arithmancer Kit. You have until the end of the semester to complete this project.

Harry shook his hand out after copying down the assignment and packed up his things. Hermione was loitering in the aisle when he turned to leave. He didn't know if she was waiting for him or for Professor Vector. Instead of trying to find out, Harry steered around her and made for the Great Hall.

Today he sat at the end of the Ravenclaw table and ate his mutton quietly while reading all the notes he'd just taken from class. Beside him was a new notebook he was starting to fill with ideas on how to approach the problem posed by Professor Vector. The quantities, qualities, and kinds of glass, metal, and sand mixture would have to be addressed. Then he would have to try several processes and apply them to a small scale working model if he could get the materials.

When he was done eating, Harry drained the last of his pumpkin juice and hurried off to the library on the fourth floor. Madam Pince glowered at him upon his entrance and Harry frowned again. The librarian was really acting odd around him lately.

In the twenty minutes left before Defense Against the Dark Arts, Harry searched the card catalogue by subject and found a few books that looked promising. He shot out locator spells and ran through the stacks to collect the shimmering golden books.

He even made sure to grab the ones in the Restricted Section from earlier in spite of the risks of being caught by the more observant than usual librarian. Hopefully there would be something about Horcruxes in the seven he wandlessly and wordlessly shrunk down and stuffed into his pocket.

She checked him out and handed back all of the books to him, minus the tiny books in his pocket and watched him leave. Outside, Harry cast a point me spell for the D.A.D.A. classroom. A month into school and it was the only classroom in the castle still jumping around the different floors and wings. With the spell working on his wand, Harry hurried on his way. Professor Hobday didn't take excuses.

Harry dodged a group of giggling third year girls wearing Gryffindor scarves on the fifth floor. He was nearing the classroom when the wand swiveled in his palm forcing him to retreat back to a staircase and climb down two levels to get to the third floor. He turned a corner and slipped behind a tapestry that could shortcut him to the other side of the castle if it was so inclined.

Luckily it was and Harry stopped hurrying as he had plenty of time to get to class now. On the other side of the passageway, Harry found Hermione talking to Dumbledore at the end of the hall from their D.A.D.A. class. He thought she looked miserable. Dumbledore must be wanting her to do more Headgirl duties or reprimanding her to do better.

Harry spared one last glance their way and entered into the classroom. Most of the Ravensclaws were chattering delightedly throughout the room as they settled into their seats. On his left, Stephen Cornfoot, the Ravenclaw Quidditch captain, was talking to Rebecca Bradley with a face so red, Harry knew he must be asking her out. To his right, Mandy Brocklehurst was chatting with Pansy Parkinson and Daphne Greengrass from Slytherin.

Draco was in the middle without his goons, Crabbe and Goyle, but was still acting as smarmy as ever. He was surrounded by Theodore Nott and Blaise Zabini pointing rudely to Su Li and Padma Patil who sat in the front talking to Hobday. The Slytherins laughed cruelly as Harry turned away from them and took his seat in the back.

The bell rang and Harry noticed that Hermione wasn't back in the room yet. She was going to lose them points. What on earth could she and Dumbledore be talking about?

Professor Hobday stood back from Padma and Su and called for attention. Harry's gaze snapped away from the door over to the tall man with salt and pepper goatee. It took the Slytherins a few seconds longer to quiet down and pay attention.

Harry held his wand loosely in his fingertips, waiting to see what Hobday would do. Sometimes he started class with a mock duel against a student and Harry wanted to be prepared. He hadn't fought

the man yet but he was looking forward to his turn. Hobday knew some lethal curses and didn't mind tossing the spells around them.

"Right, now that I have all of your attention, let us begin. First a reminder that your 4 foot scroll on common and uncommon Sphinx riddles is due next class. As for today I have a special treat. Hagrid has recently acquired an occamy."

Harry tucked his wand away and sat forward. He knew what an occamy was from *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*. He was interested in seeing if the occamy spoke the same reptilian language as snakes and if he could understand its words.

Hobday brought the snake-bird out from behind his desk and set it on top. The class looked a bit nervous, rightfully so as it was one of Hagrid's pets. Everyone jumped when the creature hissed aloud and rattled the cage. To Harry the hiss was garbled up in rage, but it was something he knew he could understand, despite it being from India.

§Let me out of here or I will bite your arm off, you miserable byproduct of a human!§

Harry bit his lip to keep from laughing at the high pitch voice of the occamy. It snarled even louder and at a higher pitch when Hobday whisked the cloth off the cage. The occamy whipped his tail out through the pipes and hit Hobday's bare arm, leaving a red whelp behind.

§See what you did! Now I have human on me!.§

Several girls shrieked in alarm and the boys leaned forward eager to see what the creature would do next. Hobday merely stepped backwards away from the cage and pulled out his wand. He made a shushing motion and smiled at the class. It was at this moment that the door opened and Hermione stepped through.

She walked up to the professor and handed him a note which he read quickly and folded up. "You may take your seat Miss Granger."

As she did, he lectured the class on the occamy and its distant relation to the basilisk. During the whole class, Harry had trouble

ignoring the outbursts of the occamy. It seemed to find the most pleasure in mocking Hobday and Draco Malfoy.

§What are you looking at, you inbred rodent with more gel then hair!§

"You'll note that this is a young occamy. An adult occamy would have required a bigger cage than this one if it had passed inspection in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. The typical adult occamy doesn't get any larger than about eight or nine feet. There are records though of some reaching closer to fifteen feet in scale."

§I'll show you young, you wrinkled skin sack!§

Harry snorted loudly and ducked his head down. He was getting queer looks from several Ravenclaws and Slytherins for his strangeness. The occamy caught everybody's attention once again when it bit the bars, cracking one of them. It also apparently cracked its tooth and was howling in pain.

Hobday resorted to casting a silencing charm at the poor creature so he could finish his lecture. Harry was glad when the bell rang and classes for the day were over. When everybody had left, including Hobday, he made his way over to the cage, careful to stay far back from the carnivorous creature. He introduced himself as he took off the silencing charm and unlocked the cage.

§If you'd like, I have a secret chamber in the school that you are welcome to call home.§

The occamy sniffed and said haltingly through its crack fang, *§Why should I trust you snake-human?§*

§What have you got to lose? I can bring you meat when you need it.§

The occamy crept out of the cage and sat on it's hind legs. *§Meat? What kind of meat?§*

§Anything the kitchens have,§ Harry replied, shifting the weight of his backpack.

§Can you bring me lamb and fix my tooth?§

Harry nodded, and the occamy considered for another moment before agreeing to try it out. Pleased, Harry cast the charm to fix the occamy's tooth and then gave the snake-bird directions to the entrance on the second floor girls bathroom. After disillusioning the occamy, he left the classroom with a promise to arrive at the Chamber shortly with provisions.

As he was making his way down to the Great Hall, Myrtle flew up to him from the floor.

"Hello, Harry," she said in her usual creepy manner. "Is it time for you to come and work on the Potential Potion?"

"Yeah, I'll be down there shortly," Harry said, dodging around her and hurrying to the kitchens to grab as many lamb chops as he could feasibly carry.

Harry spent the evening in the Chamber of Secrets listening to Serion and Oorjit, the name of the occamy, bicker like two year olds. Moaning Myrtle hovered around him as he fed ingredients into the potion and read the books he'd nicked from the Restricted Section. The one he was currently reading was entitled, *So You Want to Become a Dark Lord?* It was strange book to have in the school library, but interesting. No mention of Horcruxes yet.

By the end of the evening he was exhausted and moody, Harry was afraid he had been to snappish with Myrtle; she had left with a wail. If he'd been sure that she wasn't sitting in a U-bend somewhere, he would have sought her out and apologized. Instead, he just went to the west wing of the castle and climbed several flights to the Ravenclaw tower.

As he climbed through the portrait, Harry saw the billboard and stopped dead in his tracks. "No, they didn't," he breathed and ran up to the board.

But they did. There next to the sign announcing the Halloween Hogsmeade visit in a week, was a large poster announcing seeker tryouts the day before the Hogsmeade trip. Harry ripped the paper

from the board and crumpled it up in rage. It had to be a mistake. Cornfoot must have meant second string tryouts because, he, Harry, was suppose to get the position. He hadn't been Cho's understudy for five years for nothing.

Someone tapped his shoulder and Harry spun around almost slamming his elbow into the bushy haired girl standing before him. She had a determined look on her face and he wondered crossly if she'd give him more detentions under Filch.

"WouldyougotoHogsmeadewithme?" Hermione said in a rush.

Harry's jaw dropped. "What?"

Hermione took a deep breath, licked her lips nervously, and said again slowly, "Would you go to Hogsmeade with me next week?"

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 6°«««°»»»°

Chapter 7

Harry stood there dumbfounded not sure what to do or say. Finally he stammered, "Are you asking me out?"

"Yes," Hermione answered succinctly.

"Are you sure? Don't you mean to ask Daniel?"

Hermione threw him a nasty look. "I'm asking you, Harry Potter, so yes, I'm sure."

"Why do you want to go out with me?" Harry asked, suddenly suspicious. "I'm a real nobody."

"Because," Hermione said, pausing as she looked around the common room before meeting his gaze again. "You intrigued me."

Harry scoffed, crossing his arms and leaning back against the board. "Yeah, right."

She huffed irritably and reached to grab the paper from his fist. He held his arm up, removing the tryout notice from her reach. He wasn't about to let her post it on the billboard for others to see. It was rightfully his spot and he'd be damned before he let some silly little second year get it.

"What's in your hand, Harry?" Hermione demanded bossily, trying to capture it from him again.

"Nothing that concerns you."

She opened her mouth to say something and Harry cut her off. "And don't say, 'I'm Headgirl, of course it's my business.'"

"But I am, and it is!" Hermione stated, looking as vexed as she probably felt.

Harry stuffed it into a robe pocket and looked at her smugly. "So? Not everything I do involves you, Granger."

Her mouth twitched in annoyance and her hair bristled. "Hermione."

"Hermione," Harry parroted.

"Are you coming with me to Hogsmeade next Saturday or not?" Hermione asked after a moment.

"Why?"

"Why!" Hermione exclaimed, her face reddening. "Because, that's why!"

"Because isn't a very good reason," Harry pointed out, shifting his weight as he watched her face.

Hermione blushed and looked extremely uncomfortable for several minutes before she said in a very small voice, "If you're going to say no, please just tell me so I can go upstairs and go to sleep?"

Harry watched her look at the floor between her feet and then at the spitting fireplace and at the stairway longingly. Finally taking pity on her discomfort, he answered, "If you're sure then. Okay. I'll go."

Her beaming smile almost made it worth it he thought, as she rattled off some time and place to meet her. She dashed up to the girls' dormitories before he had a chance to respond. Harry scratched his neck, watching the top of the staircase where he'd just seen her disappear around not a moment ago. He couldn't even recall what she'd said after he had agreed to go with her. He still didn't understand why he agreed to go with her especially considering her rather high-handed treatment earlier.

Harry sighed and spun around to make his way up to his dormitory. As he climbed he pulled out the wrinkled mess that was the notice for seeker tryouts to stare at it hatefully. He was going to have to corner Cornfoot tomorrow and that wasn't going to be fun. Warily he opened the door to the seventh year boys' dorm and got into bed without changing his clothes.

In what seemed like no time at all, Harry woke to the sound of something softly tapping against the window by his bed. He squinted blearily as he sat up and searched for his glasses. They were

wedged under his pillow and he put them on, looking over at the source of the noise.

"Hedwig!" Harry called out in surprise, hurrying over and unlatching the window. "Hey girl, what's going on?"

Hedwig chirped up at him as he brought her inside the dormitory and shut the window. She hopped from his forearm to his shoulder as he rummaged through his trunk. He pulled out clean school robes, pants, and a white shirt. A quick *reparo* fixed his trainers and he scooped them up into his arms. Hedwig hopped to the top of his head and hooted.

Harry rolled his eyes at her and made his way into the bathroom. Once the door was shut, Hedwig dislodged herself and took up residence on the towel rack. Harry set his things down and cast a wordless locking charm at the door and took off his clothes from last night. He gave Hedwig a pat on the head in passing and climbed into the shower.

A few minutes were spent fiddling with the tricky knob before warm water started coming out of the shower head. Harry decided to take his time this morning. Catching water droplets on the tip of his fingers, Harry enjoyed the tingling feeling the spray created. After several indulgent minutes of standing there and soaking under the water, Harry quickly scrubbed his hair and body and got out.

Hedwig looked a little damp when he got out, causing Harry to laugh at her extremely grumpy face. She hooted cantankerously at him while he got ready; using the toilet and brushing his teeth. It was all he could do to stop himself from making a patronizing comment and getting her angry at him.

Harry pulled his pants on and picked up his wand casting a lather charm and a shaving charm. He ran a hand over his chin checking for stubble. Satisfied at the smooth line of skin, Harry tossed his shirt on and pulled his robes over his head.

He made his way down to the kitchens with Hedwig perched on his shoulder. Her mood being slightly less grouchy after he handed her a few owl treats back in the dorm room. Behind the picture of the fruit

bowl, several house elves gleefully put together an English breakfast for him, which he ate with relish. He passed several bites over to Hedwig and asked for seconds, which appeared before he finished his sentence.

When he was done, he thanked Swibby and the other elves, then drained the last of his orange juice and headed out the way he came. Harry stopped by Myrtle's lavatory on the second floor to inspect the progress and was pleased to note that he had less than a week to go to finish it off. Harry was excited. By late Sunday he could be doing the ritual and getting the results.

Harry left the Chamber and proceeded to the library to return to the Restricted Section, *So You Want to Become a Dark Lord?* and *The Unforgiveables and Other Unsavory Curses*. Harry was starting to think that a Horcrux wasn't a single spell cast on an item, but was more ritualistic in its creation. He would begin his next search under dark rituals.

Madam Pince was nowhere to be seen, much to Harry's relief. He had begun to think that the librarian had a seventh sense and could sniff him out just like Mrs. Norris, Filch's cat. After one more furtive look around to make sure nobody was watching him, Harry snuck into the Restricted Section and exchanged his books for new ones and left.

Classes started as usual with Professor McGonagall teaching a thrilling lesson on magical-animal-to-magical-animal Transfigurations. Harry found his attention wandering over to a bushy haired Headgirl one too many times for his personal comfort before class ended. He also found himself following behind her to Charms and sitting two desks behind her, just so he could watch the back of her head again.

By the time lunch came around, Harry thought his reactions around Hermione were getting a tad ridiculous and he forced himself away from the Great Hall. He spent lunch in the kitchens again and spent the rest of the time before Potions in the Chamber of Secrets working on the potential potion.

In Potions, Harry sat himself as far away from Hermione as possible so that he could concentrate on brewing the Gibbering Gabber potion

Snape had assigned them. It was a particularly violent potion that seemed to want to hurl itself out of the cauldron and onto you if you so much as stirred half a rotation more than required. As it was, it hardly mattered, because Professor Snape deducted ten points from Ravenclaw and cleared the whole thing away with an *evanesco*.

The rest of the week followed similarly with the exception of the blow up Harry had with Cornfoot Tuesday night. Another notice had appeared on the board and Harry had cornered Stephen after Defense Against the Dark Arts in the hallway beside the classroom. Apparently the goal this year was to have 'Ravenclaw win the cup' and to do that they needed 'the best seeker the house could provide.' Harry red-faced and fuming had informed Cornfoot about his track record to which the captain had replied that understudy or not, he, Harry, wasn't going to be seeker without official tryouts.

It was now the day of tryouts for the Ravenclaw seeker position, and grudgingly Harry was out standing on the pitch. Beside him on either side were younger hopefuls. Some of them, like him, were holding school issued brooms, and others shiny store-bought ones. Most were chattering excitedly with their friends about their chances of being picked for the team.

Cornfoot stepped away from the rest of the team to stand in front of them. Harry thought he looked like a right smug bastard standing there wearing his Quidditch robes with a large 'C' on the front of them designating him as captain. The rest of the Ravenclaw team formed a line behind him as he walked up and down before them.

"You're all here today because you want to be Ravenclaw's star seeker, but do you have what it takes?"

An affirmative cheer rose up from the potential players. Cornfoot planted his feet and faced off once again. Wind ruffled his hair as he asked them once again if they had what it took. The resulting cry was deafening to Harry and he winced.

"I sure hope so!" Stephen bellowed, swinging a leg over his broom stick. "All you wannabes, mount your brooms!"

Harry got on his Cleansweep and took to the air, circling high above the stadium. He watched from above as Stephen called to Anthony Goldstein, his fellow beater, to release the five practice snitches. Beside Goldstein, Su Li was handing out beater's bats the rest of the Ravenclaw team.

"Oi! Pay attention! Those that catch a snitch can stay for round two, and all others will be dismissed. If you get knocked off your broom by a bludger, leave the pitch as you are dismissed for poor broom handling. Understood?"

Harry nodded his head along with his fellow seekers. He was going to try to get two snitches at the least. While waiting for Cornfoot's announcement that they could start seeking, he was already scanning the pitch, looking for a hint of gold. When he got the signal, Harry took off to the end of the pitch and the glitter of gold by the goalposts. Several first timers chased after him before they even checked to see if there was a snitch to chase.

Harry was hoping to draw them into crossfire as the team set up around the pitch and started knocking bludgers wildly around. A bludger whizzed along side him before Harry pulled a sharp dive on the Cleansweep and got out of the way. By the time he got to the hoops there was no snitch to be seen and Harry cursed his timing and slow broom handling.

Quickly, he pulled up and started scanning again. Born with the body of a seeker and instinctual flying abilities, Harry was fast on his old broom. He knew what it could do and what it couldn't and used that knowledge to his advantage against the newbies out there on never before handled brooms. A flawlessly executed sloth-grip got him out of the way of two incoming bludgers that went on to knock two girls off their brooms.

Harry spared a glance downward to see that Cornfoot caught them all right, before darting his way through the other flyers. The sound of beating wings alerted Harry to the fact that a snitch was near him. He slowed down and started looking around. His sharp eyes found it three feet below him. Harry dived and swiftly caught it.

He tapped the golden ball twice with his wand and it folded its wings and shut down. Harry stored it in an inside pocket of his robes and felt its weight bump gently against his side. Wheeling around, Harry shot off down the pitch looking for another snitch. He didn't know how many had been caught, but until the whistle sounded, Harry was going to assume that there was one more out there to be found.

By the time the whistle did go off, Harry had three golden balls weighing his inner pocket down. He brought his broom around back to Cornfoot and alighted. Stephen asked for those that caught snitches to remain and for the others to hit the showers and take positions either in the stands or leave the pitch entirely.

Harry took out the three golden snitches from his pocket and held them out to the seventh year captain. He took immense pleasure in Cornfoot's rounded eyes and shaking fingers as he took the snitches away. The other seeker, a fourth year Harry didn't know the name of, handed over two. The look of relief passing over Stephen's face was enough to make Harry suspicious.

"Well two seekers remain," Cornfoot said finally, flashing an insincere smile at Harry. "We go into final death!"

"Great!" piped up the red-headed boy beside him, shifting his shiny broom to his other shoulder. "What are we gonna do?"

"I'm going to release one snitch and it's a race to see which of you catch it first."

"Cool," breathed the boy beside him, situating himself onto his broom.

Harry copied and took off after the release. The snitch hadn't had long to disappear, but disappear it did. Harry sometimes suspected disillusionment charms were on the tiny golden ball as well as timed Apparition jumps. Harry flew higher than his opponent, knowing he could practically freefall with the Cleansweep and still pull out of the dive unscathed.

Half an hour later, after lazily circling the pitch, Harry spotted the snitch. It was between the Slytherin stands and the professors' and parents' stand. Vaguely, he heard yelling, but Harry tuned it out,

focused on capturing the snitch. He was peripherally aware of his competition but wasn't worried. Even on a new broom, the kid couldn't catch him.

Harry fell from the sky, picking up speed and racing toward the stands. He watched it swerve and tugged on his broom, following easily. A bludger appeared out of nowhere startling Harry. He veered to the left and nearly crashed into the stands. Kicking off of them, Harry flew back towards the center of the pitch prepared to play chicken with the newcomer if he had to so that he could nab the snitch.

The kid didn't pull out of the chase as Harry came hurtling toward him. The snitch darted left and right and dodged up. Harry followed, cursing the drag of his broom as the kid pulled alongside him. He could see the snitch, just up ahead, and Harry let go of his broom in preparation. Inching up the broom, Harry struggled with the Cleansweep to keep climbing without falling behind.

If there was any limitation to the Cleansweep series it was the tail drag. It made climbing in the air a royal bitch. Harry screwed his face up in concentration and used his longer arm reach to snatch the snitch right from under the fourth year's nose. A sense of victory grew inside him, escalating as he spiraled down to meet the others. He grinned fiercely as he landed, holding out his hand with the snitch, knowing that he'd just won his position on the team.

"Thanks, Potter," Cornfoot grimaced. "I'll let you both know, which of you won the spot after you freshen up."

Harry nodded, still grinning. He shook hands with the kid across from him, no longer resenting the poor blighter for trying. Harry walked off to the locker room and replaced the broom in the store cupboard. He pulled off his sticky second string robes and laid them out on the bench in front of his locker. Whistling jauntily, Harry grabbed his shampoo and soap and made his way into the shower room.

Ten minutes later, Harry was back on the pitch, his hair still wet and drying all over the place. The kid was next to him, looking slightly glum. Harry didn't feel bad at all for trouncing the kid on the pitch. The

boy was good and with a year playing as second string; could be fine tuned into a brilliant seeker.

"Well, we've made our decision," Cornfoot stated upon the younger boy's return. "That is to say, myself and the rest of the team. We're very proud of our chosen seeker, who was fast, diligent, and brilliant!"

Harry swelled with pride. Finally, he was getting the recognition he deserved after so long.

"Welcome to the team, Blake."

The kid beside him perked up and practically jumped on top of the others in his enthusiasm. Harry however was standing stone still, watching the Ravenclaw team congratulate their new member. His face darkened as his temper rose. Harry swung Cornfoot around by the neck of his robes.

"What's the big idea, Cornfoot? I just beat that kid hands down in both rounds. You can't just give away my position. I should be seeker, damn it."

Cornfoot extracted himself from Harry's grip on his collar and brushed himself off. "That kid nearly beat you and with a little training will not only help us win the cup this year but also in the years to come. We don't need or want a seventh year seeker who has never played anything but understudy."

Harry stepped into Cornfoot and looked up at the bleach blond. "I have never lost a snitch in my life. That little punk should be second string and you know it--"

"I know nothing of the sort, Potter. Besides the team and I have made our decision and it's final. Get off our pitch, and clean out your locker."

Harry's eyes burned as he spun around and marched off the pitch heading back towards the castle. He couldn't believe it! Those ruddy gits! Well, who needed them! Who needed Quidditch! Bloody fucking sport anyway! Harry stormed through the entrance hall and up the staircase wearing a scowl the whole way.

He passed Hermione on her way down the stairs halfway to the common room and kept going. He wanted nothing to do with anyone, least of all Hermione. Suddenly, Harry turned about and stomped down the staircases quickly, finding Hermione two floors below. He grabbed her arm and ignored her startled shriek.

"I've changed my mind about Hogsmeade," Harry growled, dropping his hand. "Go with somebody else, I'm busy."

Harry ran up the stairs then ignoring the bossy way she shouted his name. Magic was rippling inside and around him by the time he reached the corridor leading to the Ravenclaw common room. His glower at the librarian portrait and his terse demand for entrance had her cowering in the corner of her frame.

"Open the bloody door! Pierre Bonacord!"

"If only you were in as good accord!" she huffed, opening the door as she patted down her frazzled hair.

Harry didn't answer her as he tromped through to the common room.

"Well, he certainly is acting like a Supreme Mugwamp," she said under her breath as she shut the portal.

Harry ignored her and weaved his way between the blue and bronze hodgepodge sofas and furniture. He ran up the stairs to the boys' dormitories and slammed through the doorway to his room. One look at Stephen's side of the room had Harry snarling in disgust. He waved his wand and the boy's bed collapsed.

Fire was set to it next as Harry systematically went about destroying Cornfoot's things. His rage unabated, spilled over to Kevin Entwhistle, a chaser on the team. Harry trashed Entwhistle's things until he collapsed onto his own bed and he beat at the pillow, pounding it into submission.

The door creaked open and a female squeak sounded. Harry muttered under his breath and waved his hand over his head. The door slammed and his curtains whizzed shut, leaving him in gloom.

He felt like sulking and not even Granger would be allowed to pass judgment on him.

The door opened again and footsteps shuffled into the room. Harry sighed and sat up, poking his head through the curtains. "You do realize girls are not allowed in the boys' dormitories. Not even Headgirls."

"Yes, I know," Hermione said, as she gingerly picked her way through the mess he created and came over to him. "But I think I deserve an explanation for you ditching me tomorrow."

Harry pulled the curtains back and sat forward on the bed. Hermione took a seat next to him and shifted so she was facing him. She stayed silent watching him until he cracked and told her about tryouts and the foul play that had taken place. As he talked, he started casting clean-up charms all over the room, putting it back together the way it was before his temper tantrum. In no time at all the room was looking like its usual messy self.

Cornfoot's bed reassembled itself--the mattress and sheets looking good as new. You wouldn't have been able to tell it had been burned to ashes. Ripped posters rejoined themselves seamlessly and broken items collected their pieces from all over the dorm room before aligning together and fixing.

"The fourth year boy, Blake, was given my spot on the team," Harry finished, sitting back and laughing bitterly. "I really don't know why I thought I could actually be on the team. It's not like this sort of thing hasn't happened before."

Harry turned his head to look at Hermione to see how she was taking his news. He was surprised to see her face a violent shade of red. Her hair was standing on end, practically sparking with electricity. She was frowning so severely, Harry was sure she'd give herself a headache.

"Anyway," Harry said, "I'm not going to be good company tomorrow and--"

Hermione exploded then, startling Harry. "Why that no good, two-faced twerp!"

"Who? Corn--"

"How could he do that to you? You rightfully earned your spot on the team and he just hands it over to some snot-nosed kid?"

"Well, yeah--"

"And you just let him!"

"I didn't let him! The whole team--"

"Why haven't you gone to our Head of House?" Hermione demanded, sitting up on her knees, her finger in his face.

Harry averted his gaze from her face and glowered at his bed. "What's the point?"

"What's the point!" Hermione shouted. "Justice! Fair-play! Equality and--"

"It's not going to do any good, Hermione," Harry inserted firmly.

"But you just can't give up!" Hermione said, aghast.

Harry shrugged irritably. "I've gone to Flitwick before and I have just been disappointed. Besides, why play when all the fun has been taken out of it?"

Hermione sank down onto the mattress, her hair deflating a little bit. "How often has stuff like this happened to you, Harry?"

Harry glanced at her face and ran a hand through his hair. "Often enough, that I should expect it by now."

"I'm so sorry," Hermione said softly, reaching out to comfort him.

Harry looked down at the petite hand resting on the curve of his elbow. It was surprisingly warm, he thought as he looked up at her. Hermione's brown eyes were sincere with her sympathy and Harry

caught himself thinking how lovely they were. She squeezed his arm and Harry looked away to the wall.

"If you still want me to," Harry said a few minutes later, after letting some of his anger slip away. "I'll come with you to Hogsmeade tomorrow."

Hermione smiled brilliantly at him and removed her hand. "Are you going to be moody and grumpy all day?" she teased.

Harry laughed, suppressing leftover bitterness. "I'll try hard not to be."

"Yes," she stated simply. "I would love it if you would come with me tomorrow."

Chapter 8

The next morning Harry was working on homework in the Ravenclaw common room near the unlit fireplace. From his position on the floor, he could see students 3rd year and up drifting down for breakfast before getting ready to go to Hogsmeade. Girls were giggling together in pairs and in small groups, while the boys clustered together in the corner discussing their upcoming dates and the new seeker from yesterday's tryouts.

Harry threw a scowl in the boys' direction before going back to work on his Time Turner homework for Professor Vector. He was making good progress with the mass to energy to time conversions, but he was no where near done. He predicted at least another month of fine tuning before calling it good and leaving the assignment alone. There were some things he wanted to verify and other things he needed to research for his algorithm before he could get to that point.

One thing Harry wanted to know about was multiple jumps. Could a person jump back again if they were already back in time? Would second and third and so on jumps be secure or would time travel become less and less stable the more a person jumped, and did that even account for the possibility of more than one version of that person running about? If stable, could he find a way to combine these jumps into one equation to create a super Time Turner?

It was all very interesting and theoretical and at the moment largely rhetorical because Harry hadn't found anything substantial on the subject. Still, Harry was pretty sure his current equation could send a person back two hours. To make the equation more efficient he was sure he would have to alter the amounts of Anachromagus Powder used in the base mixture of magical sands.

Harry was just starting to write down a series of adjustment levels to test in full format when somebody tapped his shoulder. Straightening, Harry glanced behind him and stopped dead. At eye level were two long slender bare legs that kept going only to be stopped by a skirt so short it had to be against dress code regulation.

"Hello," Hermione said, looking pink and slightly embarrassed.

"Hello," Harry returned looking up at her.

She was wearing a luscious blue knit sweater and her bushy hair was tamed. On her face Hermione wore a light layer of makeup. Her lipstick was pink and sparkly, enhanced by magic to glitter like those muggle magazine ads. She fidgeted nervously under his penetrating stare before crossing her arms over her chest defensively.

"Well?"

"Well what?" Harry asked perplexed, still looking up at her.

"Are you ready to go?"

Harry shrugged and turned back to his work and started picking up after himself. He neatly stacked every sheet of paper ignoring Hermione's sigh of annoyance. He stood picking up his two reference books and slinging them into his arms before trotting upstairs to the boy's dormitory where he threw them on his bed. The books jostled Serion who opened an eye and snarled something that made Harry grin and shake his head. Saying goodbye to the touchy snake, Harry grabbed his old grey cloak and left, heading back downstairs.

Hermione was where he left her, but she wasn't alone. Beside her stood Padma and Su who were gossiping with her and exchanging with one another their expectations for the day. Harry sidled up next to them and waited for Hermione to notice him so they could take off.

Harry learned stuff he was sure boys were not suppose to know. For instance he knew Padma was going with Dean Thomas of Gryffindor, and Su was going with Kevin from the Quidditch team. They both wanted to be kissed at the end of the date. The discussion of kissing had Harry on edge. When they started discussing hormonal stuff, his twitchiness was what finally caught Hermione's attention.

It wasn't a promising start, Harry thought walking out of the common room with her a few minutes later after she had wrapped up her conversation with the two girls. Hermione had her cloak in her arms and was fidgeting with it as they navigated the corridors to the entrance hall. They weren't really talking to one another and Harry was out of ideas on how to breach the silence.

Soon though, they reached the hall and waited. There was a line of students ahead of them handing off their permission forms to the caretaker, Argus Filch. Filch was looking at each kid trying to find an excuse to keep them in the castle as it was the ultimate punishment on a day like today.

When it was Harry's turn, he handed to Filch his forged permission slip for the year, confident in the knowledge that it would pass inspection. Filch nodded to him somewhat grudgingly and took Hermione's form running his eye up and down it several times. Filch then eyed the Headgirl badge on her sweater. He sneered at her for a moment before motioning her onward so he could terrorize the third year behind her.

"What an awful man," Hermione said once they were through the doors and on their way down past the Quidditch pitch to Hogsmeade.

Harry nodded, stuffing his hands into his pockets and looked straight ahead as they passed the pitch. "What do you want to do in Hogsmeade?"

"I was thinking about going to the bookstore. There's this book I want to buy to help with the Arithmancy project Professor Vector assigned to us."

"I could go to the Scrivenshaft's as well," Harry said, thinking he could look up dark arts books for the definition of a Horcrux.

"What are you looking for there?" Hermione asked, casting a sideways look at him.

Harry shrugged. "This and that."

"Well that was certainly informative, Harry. Please do try to be a little bit more vague."

Harry flashed her a wry grin and said, "I have to look up stuff."

Hermione huffed irritably causing Harry to laugh. The tension between them dissolved and while Harry still remained close-lipped about Horcruxes, Hermione started talking a mile a minute. He

listened and injected a comment here and there, but mostly stayed quiet. His quietness didn't deter her in the slightest, in fact she seemed to relish it.

Harry took her inattention to him to study her more closely as they wandered into Hogsmeade. She was pretty in an unconventional way, he thought. A beauty you could only really see when her hair was pulled away from her face. He figured rightly most guys just saw her as a brain and not as a girl.

Hermione didn't normally challenge the conceptions boys had of her because she never dressed up. In fact, Harry would have described her as a girl who dressed down. She didn't dress down today though, Harry noticed. Her top was a little too tight and was probably Su's, and her skirt-- Harry took another moment to admire it-- was something Padma would wear.

He watched her movements as she talked. She used a lot of hand waving to punctuate her words. But occasionally, her hands would drift down and tug at the bottom of her skirt trying to lengthen it, or her fingers would find themselves in her hair trying to pull it forward only to be caught. Every time she noticed her hands wandering she would look annoyed and bring her hands back to her hips.

The sun's rays were caught and reflected in the lipstick she wore and every time she paused she would wet them unconsciously. In short, the Hermione beside him was fascinating, but Harry wondered if she was real. Would this distracting creature disappear behind a stack of books and homework the moment they got back to Hogwarts?

Harry opened the door for her when they reached Scrivenshaft's Quill Shop. Hermione thanked him as she walked by blushing. Immediately after he shut the door, she took off and disappeared into the stacks of books and writing supplies. Harry raised an eyebrow at her backside and shook himself.

Quickly, Harry made his way over to the defense section and started scouring the different books. He did not expect to find anything at all on the subject because the books were all newly published and Horcruxes was a Ministry banned subject. Probably the likewise at

Hogwarts with Professor Dumbledore being Headmaster but Harry would keep looking until there were no more books left to check.

The first couple of titles were the newest texts on the market. Harry picked one up and skipped to the reference section in the back. There was an enchanted object section and Harry quickly skipped back to that chapter. He was disappointed to find that the only objects included were frequently cursed items such as shrinking keys and self-misplacing luggage bags.

He put the book back on the shelf and picked up another one that looked promising. Rifling through it, none of the subjects or subtitles stood out and he absently returned the book while searching for another one to glance through.

Harry had nearly reached the end of the defense section by the time Hermione came up to him. She was leaning to the left because she was being heavily weighed down by her purchases. Harry decided to help her out and cast a weightless charm on her packages relieving Hermione of the weight of her new books.

"Thanks. Did you find what you were looking for?" Hermione asked, taking her wand out and shrinking her packages.

Harry shook his head. "No such luck, though I see you got what you wanted and then some. Where to next, Hermione?"

Hermione smiled up at him, handing him her shrunken purchases. "Are you thirsty? We could grab a cold Butterbeer from Madam Rosmerta's."

"Sure," he replied easily, putting the tiny packages in his pockets. "After you."

Hermione walked out of the shop and down the street. Harry followed right behind her and took the chance to admire the sway of her hips. She looked over her shoulder at him and he jogged up to be alongside her.

"You're such a slow poke, Harry."

Harry wisely chose not to comment. Instead he moved in closer and accidentally bumped into her arm. Hermione blushed prettily and started babbling. She told him about her parents, who were muggle dentists, and how they wouldn't let her eat candy when she was growing up or allow her to shrink her overly large front teeth. She'd done the last in spite of them fourth year after Malfoy had hit her in the face with his enlarging potion.

Students were all around them. The younger ones were in large groups of friends going around having a good time. The older ones on dates were obviously at many different levels of comfort with each other. Some walked by holding hands and window shopping, while others alternated between talking and blushing at the same time.

When they reached the pub, Harry held the door open for her once again. Inside the noise level was near deafening. The expansion charm was sorely tested as more and more Hogwarts students entered behind them. It seemed that there were many students with the same idea that he and Hermione had about grabbing a cool draft of Butterbeer.

Harry led the way through the crowded interior to two empty barstools. On his way he noticed Daniel and Ron over in a corner booth trying to impress the two girls there with them. Megan Jones looked thoroughly bored with Ron and seemed to be fighting Susan Bones for Daniel's attention. Harry turned away from them and sat down as Hermione did the same.

"It sure is loud in here," Hermione yelled, trying to be heard over the volume. "I can hardly hear myself think!"

"I know what you mean," Harry shouted in return.

Hermione waved to Madam Rosmerta who finished serving another thirsty student before she came bustling over. She reached them and wiped her hands on her apron skirt, placing them on the bar top. She looked at both of them but Harry shook his head so she focused on Hermione.

"What can I do for you, Hermione, dear?"

"I'd love to have a Butterbeer," Hermione said loudly. "Cold, if you please."

"No other way on a day like today. I'll be back in a jiffy."

Hermione grinned and turned back to Harry to find him pulling her purchases out of his pockets and setting them on the counter top.

"Did you want to order a drink, Harry? Madam Rosmerta should be back shortly with my Butterbeer and you could order then."

Harry knowing he didn't have the means to pay for the drink, shook his head. "I'm good, I don't need anything to drink."

Hermione lost her grin and gave him a frown. "I thought you wanted to come and have a drink, that's why we're here."

Just as Harry was about to respond, Daniel loudly boasted about his triumph over Voldemort in sixth year. This outburst distracted Harry who turned around to give his brother a disgusted look. In Sixth year, Daniel had not found triumph in the Gaunt house. It was Harry who had rescued Daniel from his suicide mission just outside of Little Hangleton to get that blasted family ring.

He had found Daniel much like he'd found Ginny second year; Daniel's life force was apparently being drained by a ring around his finger. It was the only thing out of place in the decrepit surroundings, and Daniel always boasted about wearing the Potter ring. The signet on his middle finger was most assuredly not it. The sixteen year old Tom Riddle that he'd fought before was nowhere to be seen, instead he saw an older version of what must have been Voldemort after he finished Hogwarts; complete with a slightly snake-like visage and bloodshot eyes, calling the shots. Destroying the ring took more effort than the diary and Harry ended up poisoned and passed out over Daniel, who had recovered quickly once the ring was destroyed. Daniel got all the credit because he was found kneeling over Harry when Dumbledore finally came rushing into the house.

A hand shot in front of his face and a disembodied voice was shouting, "Harry, hello? Earth to Harry!"

Harry shook himself and focused on the hand in front of him following the line of arm attached to it and settled on Hermione's face. "Sorry. Got lost in my own thoughts for a minute."

"Some thoughts there, Harry," Hermione said slowly studying his face. "You looked quite murderous."

"What can I say?" Harry said dismissively as he watched his brother look up and send a smug grin in his direction. "Daniel grates on my every nerve."

"Why is that?" Hermione asked, accepting her drink from Madam Rosmerta and taking a sip.

Harry turned back to the bar and sighed. "He's just a prat, that's all."

"How could you say that?" Hermione asked, sparing one last glance back at Daniel and the others. "He deserves our respect. He is the Boy-Who-Lived and it rests on his shoulders to stand against You-Know-Who."

"Lord Voldemort," Harry said sternly causing her to jump. "The megalomaniac's name is *Voldemort*--" Hermione jumped again, but Harry ignored her reaction and pressed onward, "--Voldemort, and if you can't stand that, call the bastard by his real name... after all he's not immortal."

"Then how do you explain how he returned?" Hermione asked, putting her Butterbeer down on the counter and facing Harry.

Harry glowered at her. "How else would Tommy return but by magic?"

"Well you don't have to sound so cavalier about it. You do realize that your brother is the only one besides Professor Dumbledore to stand up to Lord--Lord Thingy."

"Lord Thingy?" Harry scoffed. "Come now, you can't be that silly. I thought you had a brain."

"I have a brain," Hermione said crossly.

"Prove it," Harry challenged. "Use it."

"Fine, Lord Vol--Volde--Voldemort," she stammered, grabbing her drink and taking several deep gulps.

"Congratulations you have just joined the ranks of those not too scared to say the wizard's name."

Hermione glared up over her tankard. "You happy?"

"Infinitely," Harry deadpanned, sitting back and leaning against the wall.

Hermione raised her chin. "It's an honor to be in the group Dumbledore and Daniel--"

"Wrong," Harry interjected. "Daniel has never called Tommy by his real name or by his anagram calling card."

"Then who? You said those and that implies more than one."

"Myself and Dumbledore."

"Surely, Daniel has said Vold--Voldemort? He's the Boy-Who-Lived!"

"Sure," Harry said agreeably, watching Hermione with no small amount of amusement. "In an alternate universe perhaps, but not here. Not ever. Daniel is just a scared teenager with too much fame and not enough common sense."

"Then what about you?" Hermione demanded. "Why do you say his name?"

"Because I've earned the right to call him anything I choose."

Hermione shook her head and sat forward, her brows knitted in a puzzled frown. "And Daniel hasn't?"

"You sure do ask a lot of questions," Harry said casually as Madam Rosmerta brought back Hermione another Butterbeer, his gaze never leaving her face.

Hermione seemed nervous under the attention as she took the proffered drink and sipped it. "That's me, Miss Granger, The-Know-It-All. Still you didn't answer my question about Daniel."

Harry forced a sickly smile on his face. "Funny, how all of them seem to be about Daniel in some way or another. I thought you asked me out because you wanted to get to know me, not my brother."

"Harry," Hermione said, grabbing his sleeve as he stood to stop him from leaving.

"Next time ask Daniel out," he said grabbing her hand and removing it from his arm.

A tingle raced up his fingers from the contact. Stopping, he looked down at her before he shot one last look in Daniel's direction. Daniel was watching them intently from the booth he shared with his friends. Harry sneered at him and received a familiar smug one in return. Shifting his gaze Harry caught Hermione looking at him with confusion written all over her face.

As Harry walked away from Hermione's feeble protests he watched his brother through the corner of his eye and saw him straighten up and make his way over to Hermione at the bar. Megan and Susan were looking murderous, their attention focused on Hermione as Daniel made his way to her.

Something heavy fell into the pit of Harry's stomach as he watched Hermione turn away from him to face his brother. It wasn't a very pleasant feeling, Harry thought, walking out of the Three Broomsticks feeling somewhat nauseated. There wasn't much he could do about it though. Harry licked his suddenly dry lips and started hurrying back towards Hogwarts.

He had too many things he had to do, and worrying about some girl wasn't one of them. There was less than a week left of work for his potion; he had to practice drawing the runes for the accompanying ritual; and he had to research Horcruxes. With so much to do, when would he ever have time to think about Hermi-- a girl? No, it was good that it... whatever it was... ended here and now.

"Harry!"

Harry stopped in the middle of the pathway. The buzzing of insects suddenly echoed in his ears and the gravel by his feet became very interesting. He couldn't bare to turn around and find Daniel standing next to her looking like a cat who caught the canary. So instead Harry focused on the goals of the Quidditch pitch and waited a second or two.

"Harry! Wait!"

Hermione came running up the pathway her cheeks flushed as she skidded to a stop next to him. She grabbed his arms for balance and quickly let go after righting herself. Harry watched her shift uneasily beside him looking nearly as ill as he felt.

"I'm sorry!" Hermione blurted. "I wasn't-- I didn't mean to-- it wasn't about Daniel. I swear! At least not really. I mean, he's your brother, isn't he? I was just trying to learn how you guys were together. Padma rarely has anything good to say about Parvati and I was wondering if it was the same between you and Daniel."

"Got any breath left?" Harry asked as he took in her bedraggled appearance.

"Barely," Hermione answered with a sheepish grin. "Do you forgive me? I was just trying to get to know you! Honest!"

"What about Daniel? I saw him walk over to you as I was leaving."

Hermione put her hands on her hips and gave him a look that said he was being a guy. "I ran after you."

"Oh."

"Yeah, oh."

"So, er..."

Hermione took pity on him and latch her arm through his. "Walk me back to Hogwarts, Harry."

"Right."

As they walked back, Hermione asked him about his home life and what he liked to do and which subjects he liked best. Harry answered them all, most of his answers truthful but some were still glossed over in the vaguest way possible. The walk back was more enjoyable than the walk to Hogsmeade and Harry found himself opening up to the witch on his arm.

They climbed the walkway to the entrance hall passing a very grumpy Filch on the way inside. Meandering the halls brought them inevitably to their common room and Harry felt reluctant to let her go. Hermione seemed to feel the same way and asked if he wanted to join her in the library to work on schoolwork for their upcoming lessons. Harry agreed readily and they gathered their stuff and met again underneath Madam Pince's nose.

Hermione, at one point, ran and got a signed permission slip from Professor Babbling to get into the restricted section. Harry eagerly joined her and was in the process of reading his third book from the dark arts section when Hermione snorted.

Harry stopped reading his book mid-sentence to look at her with a wry grin he asked, "Did you just snort?"

She glanced around the corner to see if Madam Pince was near before responding in a loud whisper. "I can't understand magical authors and publishers. They write the most boring and dry stuff ever and when they get to something good they say they will write no more on it."

"What is so interesting?"

Hermione read aloud from the tome. "'Of the Horcrux, wickedest of magical inventions, we shall not speak nor give direction,' -- I mean, why mention it then?"

Harry's eye widened as he made a grab for the book. "Are you sure there's no further mention of Horcruxes in the book?"

Hermione handed the book over and Harry glanced at the cover and mentally rolled his eyes. Go figure that what he was looking for was in a book entitled *Magick Most Evile*.

Hermione raised an eyebrow at him. "What on earth is a Horcrux, Harry, and why are you so interested in them anyway? The introduction said it was evil."

"Your whole book is about evil, Hermione," Harry responded, reading the introduction intently.

"Do you know what it is?"

Harry shut the book with a loud sigh. "Damn, you probably found the only book in the whole library about Horcruxes."

"Is this what you were looking for in Scrivenshaft's, Harry?"

"Yeah," Harry said shoving his book to the side. "I've been looking to find something on them for ages now. Figures you'd find it before me without even trying."

"What is it?"

"I don't know," Harry replied honestly, looking around at the bookshelves for another title to pull down and go through. "But I intend to find out."

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 8°«««°»»»°

Chapter 9

Having a girlfriend was an extra difficulty Harry hadn't originally expected. It certainly entailed some never-before-received attention... which he definitely liked. However, it also created the problem of having someone to answer to—something he never had to deal with before. Harry was used to doing things alone, without worrying about anyone else looking for him or telling him what to do. A girlfriend was a constraint on his usual free time.

Currently, Harry was running through the halls coming back from Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. His destination was the Great Hall and he had minutes to get there, grab a bite to eat, then meet with Hermione and explain why he was so late; all before their afternoon classes started. Of course, he couldn't tell her the truth so that made the explanation bit much harder to do. Especially, when the truth would have him telling her that he was hours from the completion of the Potential for Becoming Potion.

The Great Hall was practically empty by the time Harry skidded through the doorway. Hermione watched him from over the top of the enormous book she had in her lap. Her gaze never wavered from him as Harry sprinted up the long aisles to the Ravenclaw table.

"Hello, Hermione," he said, tossing her a melt-your-socks grin as he flung himself down onto the bench and grabbed a sandwich from the table. "Sorry I'm late, I lost track of time."

"Where were you?" Hermione asked, handing him a napkin and shutting her library book.

"Owlery," Harry managed after quickly swallowing his bite of his chicken sandwich.

Hermione seemed mollified at this answer and turned around to collect a few other lunch menu items for him while he reached over for the pitcher of pumpkin juice and poured himself a glass. "How's Hedwig doing?" she asked politely.

Luckily for him, Hedwig pestered him often enough for Harry to answer her honestly. "She seems to be doing alright, other than that

school owl who continues to bother her. He's doing a terrible job wooing her and all of his efforts are making her crabby."

"So, no little love nest," Hermione replied with a lift of her eyebrow as she handed him Cornish pasties.

Harry gratefully accepted the pasties while he remembered how his owl had pecked loudly and incessantly at his window last night just to get away from the foolish barn owl. Laughing he said, "No, Hedwig's not falling for his posturing."

"Hedwig's a smart girl."

"Mmm," Harry agreed through another bite of his chicken sandwich.

Hermione shook her head at him fondly and started packing up her things for class. Harry stuffed the rest of his sandwich into his mouth and with puffed out cheeks helped Hermione pack her things. Harry watched as Hermione tried repeatedly to stuff the book she'd been reading when he first came into the Great Hall into her bag without any luck.

"Hhre," Harry mumbled, pulling his wand out and casting the shrinking spell silently without really thinking about it.

"Wow," Hermione said, watching the book shrink rapidly before spinning around asked accusingly, "How come you didn't tell me you could do silent magic? We're not suppose to learn how to even attempt silent spells until closer to the holidays in Professor Hobday's class!"

"I--uh--" Harry said, having managed to finish the last bite, hurriedly grabbed his juice and drained it dry.

"Well?" Hermione asked, arms folded over her chest.

Harry scratched his head, then grabbed his bag and slung it over his shoulder. "Don't we have to get going? The bell is going to ring."

"Harry James Potter!"

“What do you want me to say, Hermione?” Harry asked irritably, not bothering to look at her as he walked toward the entrance hall.

“The truth would be nice,” Hermione muttered darkly, practically jogging to keep up with him.

Harry glanced down at the top of her curly mass of hair. “Does it matter? I’ve known how to do silent spells for a while.”

“Well how did you learn them?”

“Practice.”

Hermione let out a frustrated huff and Harry mentally reminded himself never to perform wandless magic in front of her. If she was this upset about silent spell casting then she would blow a gasket if she knew. Not to mention his ability to sometimes combine the two.

She wasn’t speaking to him when they got to Potions which suited Harry just fine. His grumpy mood matched Professor Snape’s as the greasy man started lecturing on the finer points of poisons and their antidotes, with specific highlights on the Draught of Peace and it’s counter potion Draught of Cognizance.

Not a single Hufflepuff blew up their cauldron during the period, which greatly surprised Professor Snape who made a snide comment on the incompetence of Hufflepuffs anyway. Harry kept his head down and continued to work on following the directions he’d modified slightly in his book. Hermione was beside him working just as diligently but following the directions as given by Snape on the board. Had she’d been talking to him, Harry would have pointed out the overly acidic quality of the hellebore when using peppermint would get the same results with a safer acidic level for drinking. Not to mention it improved the taste of the antidotal potion.

Harry sighed and stirred his cauldron six times anti-clockwise before dutifully removing it from the lime-colored flames and setting it to the side. He felt more than saw Hermione turn to frown at him, clearly wondering how he could be nearly finished when she still had a way to go. He started packing up his cauldron kit as he waited for the his Cognizance potion to cool down enough to set under a stasis spell in

preparation for their next class where they would have another period to complete the potion.

For the remainder of the class, Harry jotted down notes in his notebook on the potion making process. He wrote down why he changed what he did in the directions and the results that followed those changes. As Snape was making his last round through the classroom, Hermione cast the stasis charm on her cauldron while Harry collected a vial of his potion and set it aside in his bag as evidence to its current state should somebody wreck it between the end of this class and the start of the next. He could never be too cautious around Snape's vindictiveness and schoolboy grudge.

When the bell rang, Snape dismissed everybody with a sneering comment on their inability to brew even the most uncomplicated potions. Harry just rolled his eyes at the comment and took his and Hermione's cauldrons, clearly labeled with their names, to his desk. Since most students were still casting stasis charms Harry was able to quickly hand them off to Snape and escape before the git could so much as even considering blasting either potion with an *evanesco*.

"Are you going to talk to me?" Hermione asked him as they walked back to the wide main staircase in the entrance hall; Hermione off to the greenhouses for Professor Sprout's lesson and Harry back to their common room to start Charms homework in the three hours before dinnertime.

"I thought you weren't talking to me," Harry replied placing his hands in his pockets and climbing the marble stairs back up to the ground floor.

Hermione seemed to think about her answer before responding quietly, "How is it you know how to do silent spell-casting, Harry? Is it because you grew up in a wizarding home?"

Harry scoffed and quickly dodged to the right of a quartet of Slytherins making their way down the steps. When he got back to her he said sardonically, "Of course it isn't. You have access to the same stuff I do. If my parents had their way I wouldn't be able to even cast a *wingardium leviosa* as they would much prefer me to be a squib. If I

was a squib then they could disown me like most purebloods disown their squib children.”

Hermione gasped and stopped to stare at him horrified. “You’re joking, right? Why would your parents want to--why would--”

“Because it would be an acceptable way to get rid of me and not taint their precious Daniel with my attention seeking ways.”

“But that’s totally barbaric!” Hermione said aghast. “To get rid of a child because they can’t perform magic? I thought your mom was a muggleborn, how could she agree to something like that?”

“It’s practically a noble tradition in the wizarding world,” Harry replied with a shrug. “Or at least among purebloods it is. Why do you think Filch is such a bitter man?”

“Filch is a squib?”

Harry hummed an affirmative stepping to the outside of Hermione so the doors to the castle would be on her left when they came up from the dungeons. “Because I’m not the Potter heir, my parents are content to ignore me, just like everyone else.”

“Harry...”

Harry smiled wanly, before waving her off with a mild, “You better get going or you’re going to be late with Herbology.”

Hermione panicked, her brown eyes widening dramatically and her bushy hair flying every which way as she pressed a kiss to his cheek. In seconds she was running out of the castle. At the sound of the first bell rang he heard her wail in distress and watched in amusement as she doubled her pace. When she was gone from sight he turned and headed up to the Ravenclaw tower.

“Eagle’s nest,” Harry told the portrait dismissively upon reaching the top of the stairs and climbed through after it opened for him.

Under a tall skinny window, he sat down in a overstuffed chair and stretched his legs out. One of his knees popped and Harry thought

the Hogwarts should install a lift like the one in the atrium at the Ministry. Harry believed that's what the school did with indoor plumbing; he was sure the castle had somehow done it by itself. After all how could Salazar have predicted and implanted the muggle technology in his chamber and if he did know why would he?

Cracking his shoulders, Harry planted his feet back on the stone floor and got busy. From his satchel he took out six shrunken books he had borrowed from Madam Pince earlier in the day. He then enlarged them with a wave of his hand and looked at the titles to figure out where he should start. Two of the books were on Goblin security charms--found from somewhere he'd never dreamed of by Hermione. The remaining four security books were on charms, hexes, jinxes, curses, and wards from Egypt, the Middle East, and China.

The topic of security had come as a delightful surprise in Charms. Harry had been expecting Flitwick to go with the topic of wizarding study of the solar system because while sneaking back to his room one night he overheard Flitwick, Sinistra, and Butterworth talking about coinciding their curriculums. Sinistra was planning to discuss enchanted telescopes and models while Butterworth would be going over muggle misinterpretations of wizarding experimentation, better known as Unidentified Flying Objects and related conspiracies.

Today however Flitwick had started the first of several periods devoted to warding and curse breaking. Their homework assignment was to look up and bring to class several spells that they found interesting and wanted to learn. This was perfect because it allowed him to revisit his summer interest that had been literally stomped on by goblins in Gringotts with their utterly confusing trash that they passed off as membership applications and brochures.

Harry opened the first one, *Cursebreaking--Go for the Booty!* and started reading. As he read, Harry wrote down notes on curses and counter-curses that looked particularly useful. If Flitwick went over them in class Harry would practice warding, cursing, and breaking them on the Chamber of Secrets. Perhaps he'd find out how to open the mouth of Salazar Slytherin's statue, like Voldemort's memory did second year.

As dinner time rolled around, Harry leisurely put his books away and got up. He heard a few girlish giggles and looked up. Padma, Su, and Rebecca were whispering near the staircase going up to the girls' dormitories as two sixth year girls, Sally Fawcett and Lisa Turpin came down them. Their approach caused more giggling to erupt from the trio and Harry narrowed his eyes in distaste. He took his things and climbed his stairwell to the seventh year boy dorm.

Inside, Cornfoot and Entwhistle were tossing a quaffle back and forth nonchalantly from opposite sides of the circular room. Terry was doing his Transfiguration practice on his bed. Harry watched him try twice to turn the pygmy puff into a metal bird cage without success. On the third attempt the pygmy puff sneezed and changed color to be dark pink. Entwhistle laughed loudly and tossed Terry the quaffle.

"You're so bad at Transfigurations, Terry, it's a wonder you're in Ravenclaw."

"Oy," Terry grumbled, wincing as the red ball smacked him in the chest before he caught it. "At least I didn't mix up SIRIUS with Wezen on the astronomy exam last week!"

Harry tuned them out as he crossed the room quickly to check his bed to see if Serion was there sleeping. The little green snake wasn't there, so Harry left without a word and went downstairs to sit next to Hermione and her group of friends, who did their best to ignore his presence. Hermione greeted him cheerfully and went back to discussing animatedly with Sophie Prachet, a sixth year girl with straight brown hair and dozens of freckles, why taking all twelve offered N.E.W.T. classes was imperative to getting a good job.

Harry slipped her book bag off the bench and sat in the freed up space. Taking his plate, Harry started scooping up shepherd's pie, peas, carrots, and mashed potatoes; all drowned under liberal amounts of butter and gravy. He placed a napkin over one leg and grabbed his utensils and started digging into his dinner.

Hermione grabbed his hand at one point and tried to bring him into the conversation she was having with Sophie and Padma and Terry. It was to no avail. She was getting very angry with their attitude until Harry squeezed her hand gently under the table. She looked over at

him and he flashed her a smile which she tentatively returned. In the end, Harry contented himself with just finishing off his second helping of shepherd's pie and holding her hand under the table.

After desert ended, Hermione turned around and straddled the bench, bringing their joined hands out from under the table. "I'm so, so, sorry, Harry. I don't know what their problem is, but they had no right to--"

"Hey," Harry broke in, stabbing the last bite of his custard tart and angling the fork in her direction. "I'm use to it. I don't expect that being your boyfriend is going to get me into any little clubs. They're going to probably wonder why you're with me and someone will try to take the mickey out of you sometime when I'm not around."

Hermione eyed the custard tart dangling so temptingly at the end of the fork. Harry gave it a little shake which made Hermione roll her eyes at him. He shrugged and popped the last mouthful into his mouth and chewed with relish.

"Did you manage to get yours Charms work done?" Hermione asked him, as the food, plates, and dishes suddenly vanished leaving all four house tables clear of all obstructions.

"Yeah, some interesting stuff in the goblin books you found. I was over at Gringotts during the summer looking into their account securities but didn't have much luck. The goblin I talked with was probably laughing at me--"

"Hermione?" interrupted a voice.

Harry looked away from Hermione towards the familiar voice and suppressed a grimace.

"Hi, Daniel," Hermione said, dropping Harry's hand and swinging around on the bench. "What do you want?"

Daniel stood there looking smug and cocky, with his shiny Headboy's badge over his Gryffindor crest on his robes. Daniel had obviously just run his fingers through his hair in an attempt to make it look windblown and cool. Harry turned around on the bench and leaned back against the table to take his brother's appearance in more fully.

“Hermione, I was wondering if you wanted to go patrol the halls with me for the next few hours,” Daniel said, throwing Harry an arrogant smirk.

Hermione nodded quickly and said, “Sure. Harry, if you could, would you mind taking my book bag back to the common room and placing it by the entrance?”

“Not a problem,” Harry replied, watching his brother even as he bent over and picked up her bag, tossing it casually over his shoulder.

Hermione leaned forward and pressed a quick kiss to his cheek, mollifying him somewhat. “I’ll see you later tonight.”

“Well, we really must be going,” Daniel said, offering an arm out to his girlfriend who took it hesitantly looking back at Harry dubiously. “Head duties and all.”

Harry glared at his brother as they walked away from him. He stood up from the table and marched after them through the Great Hall doors and quickly sprinted back to Ravenclaw tower to drop off Hermione’s book bag and to grab his ritual supplies and a heavy cloak. Now would be the perfect time to execute it as Hermione would be occupied.

In under ten minutes, Harry was hissing in front of the bathroom sink in Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom and hurrying down the pipe with sticking charms on his shoes. Oorjit and Serion were lounging in the pit that used to be full of vermin bones that they had had Harry clear out with several strong banishing hexes. Myrtle drifted through the stone wall next to the snake door and said hello.

“Is the potion finished?” Harry queried, stepping through the doorway and striding over to the shimmering potion.

“It stopped frothing about thirty minutes ago,” Myrtle giggled, watching Harry’s derriere as he leaned over the cauldron and filled a flask full of the glowing potion.

Harry put a stopper in the flask and said, “Perfect, that means the potion is at its optimal level of potency.”

“So what now, Harry?” Moaning Myrtle asked, wrapping a braid around her index finger and biting the end.

“Now I perform the ritual. The manual says it must take place in a clearing under the rays of a full moon.”

Myrtle squealed in terror. “You’re going into the Forbidden Forest?”

Harry frowned at her and tucked the flask inside his school robes. “What on earth would you be afraid of in there? You’re dead!”

Myrtle shrieked angrily, wailing, “Oh, I see how it is! I’m dead so I can’t have any feelings! Mock Myrtle because--”

“Myrtle,” Harry inserted, patronizingly. “Myrtle, stop. You of all people should know that despite any fears you have of the forest, none of the creatures could ever harm you because you’re a ghost.”

She sobbed harder and started to hiccup. Harry wished he could smack her but settled for rolling his eyes and walking back toward the snakes.

“Wait! Where are you going?” Myrtle screeched in obvious disgruntlement.

“To the Forbidden Forest,” Harry tossed over his shoulder.

Myrtle flew to catch up with him and swirled around so that she blocked his path. “Alone?” she demanded. “At night? On a full moon? Harry, you mustn’t!”

“But I must,” Harry replied firmly. “The ritual must be tonight or I will have to rebrew this potion again for next month.”

“You’ll get killed for sure,” Moaning Myrtle wailed before hiccupping to a sudden stop. “If you get killed, Harry,” she said perkily, “You can always share my toilet!”

Harry shocked into silence, took a moment to think about the proposition and had to bite back a laugh. Instead he merely nodded his thanks while Serion was chuckled at him in the background. Oorjit

hissed at him to be careful of the large spiders and then made a demand for steak served raw the next time Harry came back to the Chamber.

§*Good luck*,§ Serion called after him, still sniggering at the ghost's proposition.

As Harry disappeared up the flight of stairs he called back with a hiss, §*With any luck, I'll be back tonight starting the next potion that will help prep my body for the change.*§

Harry disillusioned himself once in the bathroom and checked his reflection out in the mirrors. Satisfied with the results, Harry grabbed his stuff and did the same to it. Without any trouble at all, Harry was able to sneak out of the castle and slip through the grounds into the Forbidden Forest. While walking he tried not to think that Myrtle was right about getting himself killed with the nearly Gryffindor foolishness he was committed to doing.

Harry avoided patches of Devil's Snare and Tripping Vine as he hurried further and further into the woods. Just as he was suspecting that he would never find any clearings at all in the Forbidden Forest, Harry stumbled upon one. It was fairly large and covered with a layer of rainbow-glow flutterbugs that looked nothing less than a richly woven carpet that winked continuously in a myriad of colors.

He took a moment to appreciate the view before stepping forward and startling them all into flight. For a few minutes he was being whipped around on all sides by the flutterbugs, their glowing tail ends lighting up the air like a thousand gems. In the silence and darkness that followed, Harry set himself up in the middle.

He carved six runes in a large circular formation and placed crushed billywig stingers into their seams. Then he stripped down to his boxers and carefully crept into the center of the circle and sat down. From the pamphlet, Harry slowly read the Latin script that would call upon his magic and bring it forth to be enhanced by the moon's power. Next Harry plucked a few hairs from his head and dropped them into the bottled flask before he drowned the contents. Six seconds from finishing the ritual's directions he was conked out, lying haphazardly in the circle.

Harry woke up in the clearing, but the clearing was transformed into a new world. All around him the colors of things were off. The grass was orange and the trees were yellow and red polka dotted. The flitterbugs he saw earlier were talking--talking!-- to each other in heavy Scottish accents.

"You numpty! Whatever for would you need a broolly?"

"Broolly? I haven't mentioned a broolly of an kind!"

"Don't be daft! You've been wittering on about them--"

When he tried to walk forward, Harry fell down, his feet not quite as coordinated as he remembered. The world spun, hazy and splitting off into multiples before coagulating back into singles. He had a distinct, unpleasant feeling, that he was going to get sick.

Rolling onto his back, Harry gazed woefully up at the night sky, which was lime green with dark pink clouds drifting over the black moon. Something hadn't gone right with his potion. He was pretty sure he'd drugged himself unwittingly and cursed Mr. Borgin to hell and back.

Lying there mentally ranting about untrustworthy store keepers, Harry didn't notice the clouds swirling faster and faster. What once was streaking dark pink clouds was now looping script steadily forming into six words. A loud and bicker battle between two flitterbugs flying over him drew his attention upwards and Harry gasped.

"You have the potential to become."

Then as if sensing his attention the words shifted to read something that excited Harry even more so than learning he could if he worked hard, become a full fledged animagus.

The new six words read, "You can become a magical being."

The elation seemed to be too much for Harry who suddenly felt woozy and nauseous as shiny green bursts of light flitted across his vision. The howling wind died to a low hiss, a calm before the storm. He passed out after a hauntingly familiar burst of unforgivable green flashed before his eyes.

Harry gasped for air, heaving himself up off the ground into a sitting position as his eyes watered and his lungs burned. Getting his bearings, Harry saw that the sky was lighter. It was morning.

“Oh shit,” Harry breathed, scrambling to his feet and quickly clearing his mess with a wave of his hand. “Hermione’s going to kill me!”

Harry cast the point me spell on his wand and ran like the dickens through the woods. As if sensing his distress, nothing in the forest bothered him. Not even the centaurs, who by now were sure to have noticed his presence.

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 9°«««°»»»°

Chapter 10

Hermione watched Harry like a hawk. Her penetrating gaze was making Harry very uncomfortable. She hadn't said anything to him so far at breakfast, but even her hair frizzled with latent anger. He didn't know what to say to break the silence.

A part of him was still leaping with joy at the successful result of his ritual the night before. Another was tied up in knots, making it hard for him to chew the bacon he'd just put in his mouth. It tasted like sawdust and he was tempted to spit it out into his napkin.

"Stop staring at me," Harry said weakly, swallowing thickly and gulping down orange juice to wash away the taste.

"Where were you last night?"

"Asleep," he lied. "I didn't think it would be a big deal. You were out patrolling with Daniel and I figured you had homework to complete when you got back."

"I wanted to spend sometime with you," she said, stabbing at her scrambled eggs and stuffing the bite into her mouth.

Harry watched her face as she ate. Her brown eyes were flashing with annoyance. Her lips were pursed together as she concentrated on her plate, making them look utterly kissable and pouty. Suddenly, Harry didn't feel nervous at all about her anger.

"Look," he began, irritated, "I'm sorry, all right. Are you going to be mad at me all day?"

"Thinking about it," Hermione muttered crossly.

Harry's eyes lit up mischievously as he grinned. "If you stay mad at me, you're not going to be thoroughly kissed tonight."

Hermione stopped eating and stared at him, her mouth agape. "That's utterly ridiculous."

“Well,” Harry drawled, taking another piece of bacon and eating it whole. It tasted delicious and he took another. “You’re only punishing yourself by punishing me.”

“Why you insufferable--”

“Unbelievably gorgeous, talented, and thoroughly kissable, Potter?”

“Harry!”

“What? I don’t want you to be mad at me. I can’t kiss *you* either, even though you do have an adorable pout.”

Hermione’s red face turned brighter as she tried to hide behind her edition of *Hogwarts, A History*. Harry laughed at her distress and ate another slice. If anything she turned even redder at this until finally Harry took pity on her and dragged her from the table. They made it to the entrance hall before Hermione turned around and smacked him in the chest.

“Ow,” he said rubbing the spot where she hit him. “What was that for?”

“Harry James Potter, you pig!”

Harry captured her hand, which had been raised up to hit him again, and used it to pull her forward against his chest. He could feel her breathing against him and dropped his chin to catch her gaze. Their eyes meshed, and Harry, who’d been itching to do this all morning, sought her lips with his.

He demanded entrance and she yielded with a sigh. His hands curled around her waist pulling her harder against him as he delved deeper into her mouth. The kiss dissolved into another; slower, warmer, wetter. Hermione switched the angle, brushing her tongue languidly against his own. Harry moaned, his fingers digging into her hips.

A cough distracted Harry and he pulled away looking towards the source of irritation. Daniel was standing by the suit of armor, giving Harry a death glare. Harry squeezed Hermione’s waist gently and stepped back, dropping his hand to catch one of hers.

"No inappropriate public displays of affection in the halls," Daniel informed darkly as he approached them.

"What was inappropriate about it?" Harry challenged, tightening his grip on Hermione's hand as she tried to pull away.

"Acceptable behavior does not extend beyond hand holding and chaste kisses," Daniel replied, crossing his arms.

Hermione succeeded in removing her hand from Harry's grip. He frowned at her, but she ignored him, using her freed hand to shakily push back her hair from her face. She righted her clothing, but in the end her face was still pink and her lips still plump and a little red from his kisses.

"I'm going to have to deduct points and give you a warning."

"Now wait a minute--"

"Rules are rules," Hermione agreed, staying Harry. "How many points?"

Daniel gave her a once over that had Harry bristling with anger. "Ten, from each of you. If I see you two again, it's going to be detention with Filch."

Hermione nodded, fixing a pained smile on her face. "Okay. See you in Divination tonight."

Daniel looked at first surprised, but then he looked pleased. "Sure thing, Mione," he said, flashing a million galleon smile.

Harry guided Hermione away from his brother quickly, grumbling under his breath to her. "Lousy, no good, little wanker. Where does he get off?"

"He was just acting as Headboy, Harry," Hermione reprimanded, poking him in the ribs, and looking over her shoulder. "There's a reason that rule is in place."

"Yeah," Harry retorted drolly, "an antiquated one."

“Rules exist to uphold order,” replied Hermione stubbornly.

“And are meant to be broken,” Harry said shooting her an amused look as they rounded the corner and took a side staircase up to the Ancient Runes classroom. “Let’s risk it and snog again. We might get lucky and Snape will be the one to find us next.”

“That’s not funny, Harry.”

“Doesn’t mean I don’t want to do it though.”

Hermione opened and shut her mouth twice with an audible click before replying, “You’re incorrigible.”

Harry grinned and sprinted forward to open the door for her. She thanked him primly and walked through. He followed, taking a moment to admire the pert sway of her bum under her robes. Hermione looked over her shoulder at him and he quickly averted his gaze and took his seat beside her at the front of the class.

During Professor Babbling’s lecture, Harry listened and wrote notes with half an ear. The other half of his attention was focused on Hermione. Particularly, her mouth, which was currently nibbling on the end of her sugar quill.

Dumbledore came halfway through the double period wearing outrageous orange colored robes with black cats prancing around them. The Headmaster requested Hermione to join him in resolving a particular matter that arose. Harry wondered what had happened that required Hermione’s explicit attention, but didn’t comment on it as she gathered her stuff to leave.

“Take notes for me, please, Harry?” Hermione asked, slinging the shoulder strap of her bag over her head.

Harry nodded and watched her leave to go to Dumbledore. When the door clicked shut, Harry’s attention was taken up by Babbling continuing with his lecture. He took notes more attentively now, but a part of his mind was occupied with trying to figure out what could have happened. Would his brother be called in as well? His scar

wasn't prickling, so it had to be a regular school matter. Nothing to be suspicious about. Right?

The bell rang an hour and a half later. Harry stood up gratefully from his seat and started to pack away his things. He cast a charm on his notes to create a duplicate copy. Before placing both of them in his bag, he made sure to remove the doodle he made of Daniel getting repeatedly smashed in the face by his Headboy badge from Hermione's copy.

Harry ducked into the library on his way to Arithmancy to steal a few books from the restricted section. Madam Pince eyed him beadily and made motions to walk out from behind her desk and follow him. Annoyed at the librarian's attention, Harry slipped behind the overstuffed shelves and cast a disillusionment charm on himself and a silencing charm at his feet. The feeling of breaking eggs drizzled over him; when the sensation stopped, Harry continued on his way to the back of the library.

He snuck over the little gate and went to the Dark Arts section. He reasoned that if Horcruxes were evil, an evil wizard would have been the one to create them. He bypassed the histories and started looking at other titles. A few of them were hilarious and Harry had to stop himself from laughing outright when he read *Good Help is So Hard to Find: Choosing Your Minions*. A few seemed a bit more reliable and so Harry grabbed them from the shelves and shrunk them. The book entitled, *Dark Magic is White Magic the Ministry Doesn't Want You to Learn*, didn't want to leave its spot on the shelf and Harry had to persuade it with a few disintegrating hexes at its spine before it wiggled loose.

Satisfied, Harry shrunk the book and stuffed it into his pocket. He jumped at the sound of the first bell ringing and quickly left the library just barely avoiding running into Madam Pince. Halfway to class, Harry remembered he was still disillusioned and hurriedly cast finite on himself. He made it just in time to Professor Vector's class. The bell rang as Harry started toward Hermione. She was looked over her shoulder at him and smiled in relief.

“Sorry, I’m late,” Harry offered, sitting down and pulling out his notebook. “Had to double check something in the library. What did Dumbledore need you for earlier?”

Hermione watched him for a moment before facing back towards Vector asked quietly from the corner of her mouth, “A girl was trapped in the vanishing cupboard. Did you take notes?”

“Of course I did,” Harry whispered, dipping his quill into the inkwell and writing the date, topic, and sub-topic, Professor Vector had on the blackboard.

“Well?” she asked impatiently, holding out her hand.

Harry pushed it aside with a smile. “You don’t need the notes now. I’ll give them to you later... for a price.”

Hermione’s eyes widened and she abruptly faced away from him. Harry laughed at her softly and dipped his quill. Professor Vector handed out worksheets to everyone as she walked by. Harry handed one to Hermione when the professor placed a few at the corner of their workstation. Hermione hummed delightedly and whipped out her old notes. Harry pulled his eyes away from her and looked down at the handout.

Practical Time-Turner Applications (1 of 3):

Misjumps and How to Prevent Them

Analyze the follow equations and fix the mistake that causes a misjump.

Harry worked steadily on the handout, which was several pages long, throughout the period. At one point, Hermione called Professor Vector over to ask her a question about problem four. Harry listened in and backed up three problems to look at his work. Seeing that he had done what Vector was trying to tell Hermione how to do, he went back to problem seven. There were ten in all and Harry felt pretty confident he could complete them before the bell rang.

He was just finishing up problem ten when the bell rang and the class moaned dejectedly. Hermione joined the lament as she put her quill down with a sigh.

"Haven't finish?" Harry probed lightly.

Hermione shook her head and carefully stack her work together to put with the handout in her bag. "I don't think anybody did. I'm not sure we were meant too either."

"I did," Harry said, stepping out into the aisle. "Just as the bell rang. What problem are you on? If you need help finishing--"

"I'm perfectly capable of doing it on my own," Hermione inserted sharply, following him out into the aisle. "I don't need your help, Harry."

"Fine, then you won't get it," Harry returned brusquely, pushing through the classroom doors and casting a point me spell on his wand. It swiveled and came to a stop in the direction the defense classroom had been last. He hoped this meant the classroom was finally settling down for the year and wouldn't make him hunt it down anymore.

"Look, Harry," Hermione said, walking faster to keep up with him, "I'm the one people come to for help. I have never encountered anything academically that I couldn't handle. I'm sorry, but I really want to do it on my own."

Harry slowed somewhat, watching his wand swivel to the left, and nodded. "I get it. I won't offer next time, okay? I'll just assume you won't want it."

Hermione chewed her lower lip and after a moment asked timidly, "Would you like to help me after Divination?"

"You have to go patrolling with Daniel, first though, right?" Harry asked, trying to keep his voice mild.

Hermione paused mid-stride and exclaimed, "I completely forgot about that!"

Harry's mood lightened at her response about his brother and hurried them down another corridor. The armored knights burst out into song as they passed which lifted his mood even more. Hermione started giggling uncontrollably at the bawdy limericks being sung at them from all sides.

Harry stopped and bowed exaggeratedly in her direction and offered her a hand. She accepted and Harry swung her into a clumsy dance that carried them down the stretch of hallway. Breathless, Hermione let go of his hands and patted down her bushy hair.

"That was certainly exciting. I don't think I've ever heard the armor sing before other than during the winter holidays and certainly nothing as naughty as that."

"I bet they were charmed to do so when somebody walked by," Harry murmured thoughtfully, enjoying her flushed cheeks.

Hermione frowned. "You mean as in a prank?"

Nodding, Harry motioned for her to precede him and walked behind her the last few steps to the D.A.D.A. classroom. She opened the door and held it for him as he followed her into the class. Hermione sat in the middle of a row, next to Su, saving a seat for him on her right. Harry took his seat as Hobday, his goatee trembling menacingly announced that if the occamy didn't return soon he would put the whole class in detention.

Harry whistled mentally to himself as he listened with only half an ear and took out his notebook. He created a few snake doodles. He even made some of occamies with different shaped wings. A few of them were feathered but most he drew with leather wings that were reminiscent of bat wings. Hermione poked him hard, nodding her head in Hobday's direction as he shifted topics to Veritaserum and why it was no longer a creditable method to gather evidence.

It was interesting for Harry to see how it went from the end-all-be-all way to collect evidence to bottoming out as an unreliable source. All it took was a few important cases during the Death Eater Trials, nicknamed DEETs, after Voldemort's first reign of terror to establish its ineffectiveness. One person had been under both the imperious

curse and the potion while testifying. A few more had the antidote condensed into the shape of a muggle pill. The testifier would bite the pill in half to keep from incriminating himself. It was a big conspiracy cracked by Auror Cloudy Moore.

Harry was so caught up in the lecture, he'd stopped taking notes just to listen. As class ended, Harry wondered what it'd be like to be known for cracking a conspiracy. A certain type of celebrity status would surely follow, and while it wouldn't last forever, it would ensure his name in history texts.

"I'm off to Divination now, Harry," Hermione said, breaking his thoughts as she brushed her lips against his cheek and wandered out into the hall.

Harry trotted after her and caught her hand up in his, linking their fingers together. When she departed to the north tower for Trelawney's biweekly lecture in craziness, he swung her back into his arms for a searing kiss. Hermione broke it off quickly and dashed away.

Harry headed for the second floor girl's lavatory to start the second potion. Halfway there, Hedwig came swooping down from one of the many windows and perched on his shoulder. Harry flashed her a grin, stroking her soft white feathers in greeting. She nuzzled into his hand and nipped on his fingers, hooting softly.

"Hey there, girl," Harry murmured, slowing his pace. "I haven't seen you in a while. What have you been up too? That male owl still bothering you?"

Hedwig bobbed her head, hooting sharply, her yellow eyes flashing annoyance.

"I see," Harry chuckled. "Want to escape him for a few days and stay with me?"

She bit his earlobe and took flight down the corridors, beating him to the girls' toilet. Harry followed through the swinging door and ran right through Myrtle. He shuddered violently as he turned back around to face her.

“Sorry about that Myrtle,” Harry grimaced, brushing at the lingering iciness on his skin.

“Hello, Harry,” Myrtle said brightly. “You’re going to work on the more complicated of the two potions now? Three more months for us to brew together all sorts of things.”

“Er... yeah,” Harry said, holding in another shiver. He faced the sink and peered down at the shimmering golden snake on the underside of the faucet. §*Open,*§ he hissed softly and stood back. Hedwig swooped down gracefully and was gone.

Myrtle pouted, flying up to him. “Not down there again!”

“Yes, down there again,” Harry confirmed, casting the sticking charm to his feet and descending down the pipe.

At the bottom he looked up at the glowing light from the dancing torches and shouted §*Close!*§ The bright circle of light disappeared so that there wasn’t even a sliver of it left, entombing Harry inside the Chamber. Hedwig hooted from a stone outcropping, catching his attention.

§*Snake-human!*§

§*His name is Harry, you stupid bird.*§

Harry glanced away from his snowy white owl down at the pair of snakes lounging against plush velvet cushions.

§*Serion, Oorjit--*§

Oorjit reared, flapping his wings and snapping his jaws, hissing angrily, §*I am not a stupid bird, you common belly crawler! I’m magical being from an ancient and majestic species--*§

Harry stepped forward and picked Serion up in one smooth gesture. Oorjit lunged forward, but Harry hit him firmly on the head as Serion heckled the bird-snake. The occamy fell backward, sulking while Harry deposited Serion a few feet away, chiding them both on their foolish pride.

§Honestly, you'd do better, the both of you, if you wouldn't goad each other.§

§He started it,§ Serion grumbled, curling up and yawning.

§Did not,§ Oorjit shot back with a snarl.

Harry shook his head at the two of them and motioned to Myrtle to follow him into the second and larger Chamber. He set to work clearing the space of the last potion. He dumped the cauldron contents into the water bordering the walkway and scrubbed it clean. He sent a silent wandless *scourgify* to the floor stones. He also reordered and stacked his ingredients.

Harry pulled out the pamphlet containing the 'Prepping the Body for the Change' potion recipe. He checked off the list of ingredients against the stash he had down in the Chamber. Lionfish spine, check. Salamander blood, check. Devil Snare roots, Ashwinder eggs, and fluxweed, check. Bubotuber pus, Doxy venom, and Erumpent fluid, check. Just going over the list reminded Harry of how he'd given himself a strong dosage of hallucinogenic with the first potion. This time he would surely need a small supply of bezoars handy, since half the list was poisonous in nature.

Myrtle giggled delightedly when she saw what he'd put to the side for the next potion. Harry threw her a dirty look and poured over the instructions. With the exception of a few ingredients, he could prepare them all right now for easy brewing. It took Harry all through dinner to do just that and by the time he was done, his stomach was growling mulishly. It took him another thirty minutes to start the potion and get it to the first stage of temporary stasis.

Harry was climbing the staircase and yelling over his shoulder ten minutes after that. "If it starts to turn moldy, come get me right away, Myrtle."

"Even if you're in class?" the girl ghost asked slyly as Hedwig darted past her spectral form.

Harry nodded affirmatively, not looking back as he exited the Chamber. "Even if."

“How about in the shower?” she asked tenaciously, popping up through the floor. Her eyes wide and innocent behind her spectacles.

“No! Then you’re to tell Serion so he can come get me,” Harry said quickly.

She pouted at him as he exited the toilets with Hedwig. It was a lucky escape on his part. A quick trip to the kitchens provided him with enough sandwiches to feed a contingent of Aurors for a week. Munching happily he entered the common room and looked around for Hermione. Hedwig launched off his shoulder and took her place on the mantle over the blazing fire. His eyes met and found Luna’s, who tucked her wand behind her ear. She was sitting with two fifth year girls, Harry didn’t recognize and Harry slid his gaze to the other side of the common room.

Hermione was sitting in a big squash chair, stroking Crookshanks as she read from her Divination book, *So You Think Fortune Telling is a Bunch of Hoopla?* Harry waved to her and pointed to the boys’ dormitory while mouthing, “I’ll be right back.” She nodded and went back to reading.

It took Harry a few minutes to unpack his things and grab the stuff he needed to work on for a few assignments. His potions book for one and his arithmancy notebook for another. He trotted back downstairs and set up on the table next to Hermione’s chair. He got done fairly quickly and moved himself over to the long couch where he read from the restricted library book, *Dark Lords are Just Misunderstood, by Come M Erida*, careful to keep the cover out of Hermione’s line of sight.

By the time it was ten past midnight they were all alone in the common room. Everybody else had gone to bed. Hermione looked up from her homework, which she’d been diligently pursuing for her Divination class despite it’s wooly elements.

Hedwig hooted from her perch, peering down at them with her large yellow eyes. Harry chuckled and withdrew his sack of owl treats he’d nicked from Hagrid earlier in the week. He opened the bag and tossed her a few, which she caught and nibbled on delicately.

Hermione watched Hedwig for a minute before snapping her books shut and pulling out her Arithmancy homework. She looked at Hedwig briefly before looking his way. She stood up, bringing the handout with her and sat down on the couch beside him.

“Would you like to check number four for me?” she asked primly, briefly reluctant to let him pull the handout from her grip.

Harry flashed her a melt-your-cauldron grin and tugged it free. He quickly flipped to the problem’s page and read over her notes. They worked on that for a few minutes, before Hermione grabbed the worksheet from him and tossed it in her vacated chair.

Turning around, Hermione leaned against his chest and pressed her lips to his in a light chaste kiss. She closed her eyes and pressed against his mouth a little more firmly. Just the feel of her lips against his jolted Harry like that Hufflepuff cup did whenever he tried to pick it up.

His arms encircled her waist, tugging her forward. Hermione braced herself, her hands spanning the breadth of his chest. She pressed the line of her body tightly against him, changing the direction of the kiss as she did. Harry moaned his approval as he deepened the kiss once again, swirling his tongue around hers.

His fingers curled around the nape of her neck, burying themselves into her hair. She sighed softly, opening her mouth wider over him, as they lost themselves in the kiss.

“Hermione,” Harry asked, pulling back, his fingers still laced in her hair.

“Yes, Harry?” Hermione whispered, blinking her eyes opened.

“Where is this going?” Harry asked, meeting her gaze. “How do you feel about me?”

“Harry?” Hermione said uncertainly, sitting up a little.

Harry let her hair slip free from his grasp. "People don't notice me Hermione. But you've asked me out even though you know I'm not my brother. So I guess, I have to ask, why?"

"You want me to stroke your ego?" Hermione guessed, scooting away from him.

"No," Harry countered, capturing her hands in his so she couldn't escape. "An honest answer would suffice."

Hermione closed her eyes and sighed, tugging her hands free. "Because I never took the time to care before and this year I've seen you be noble and self-sacrificing where you should be selfish and uncaring."

Harry smirked at her clearly remembering her actions on the train ride. "What else could I have done when you were behaving like a foolhardy Gryffindork."

Hermione swatted at his chest, her burning cheeks belying her attempt at anger. Harry's grin broadened before swooping down and capturing her mouth with his own. She was surprised but quickly melted into the kiss, her soft moan of delight ringing in his ears.

°«««°»»°End Chapter 10°«««°»»°

Chapter 11

“Bloody fuck,” Harry growled, slamming the book down on the table, startling Hermione from her Transfiguration essay.

“What’s wrong, Harry?” Hermione sighed tiredly, dropping her quill and shaking out her hand. The scroll she was writing on was six feet long with microscopic print.

Harry flung himself into the chair across from her and slumped forward. “It’s impossible to research anything in this library. It’s been three weeks since you’ve found that one liner in *Magick Most Evile*. Why is it that there are absolutely no books on subjects that you want to know about and thousands of books on inane random subjects you couldn’t care less about?”

Hermione blew on the glistening wet ink. “Have you tried Flourish and Blotts?”

“Yeah, and all I succeeded in doing was getting a look from the cashier. It’s a banned Ministry topic.”

“Why would you expect it to be located in the Hogwarts library then?” Hermione asked, looking up at him from over the top of her scroll.

“Because Dumbledore rarely accommodates the Minister,” he said, resting his chin on top of his folded arms.

She scowled at him. “The Headmaster follows the laws, Harry.”

“Not in all things, Hermione. He shirks laws that hinder him from completing his goals. Or haven’t you noticed?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Hermione said superciliously, rolling her homework up and securing it with a wax seal charm.

“Don’t be naïve, Hermione. Why do you think Fudge and Dumbledore are always at odds?”

“You tell me.”

Harry shook his head and stood up from the table. He gathered the books he'd been going over for the last couple of hours and tucked them under his arm. "Dumbledore is a great wizard, Hermione. He is, there's no doubt to it, but he will run roughshod over anything that doesn't go with his plans."

"Dumbledore is the greatest Light Wizard since Merlin!" Hermione hissed at him, as he walked back toward the stacks. "He would do no such thing!"

"Maybe," Harry agreed easily, disappearing into the Charms stacks. "But why hasn't he gotten rid of Voldemort, if that's the case? Why is he looking to a 17 year old boy to do it for him? After all he took care of Grindelwald, didn't he?"

Hermione didn't answer him and he slipped away further into the stacks. He was going to give up checking the library for stuff on Horcruxes. There was no point, he thought, giving credit to Hermione's point. Dumbledore wouldn't have books on an *evil* banned subject in his school; at least not where students could get to them.

Harry's new target was the Headmaster's office and checking the wizard's personal library. He wouldn't be able to do what he'd done to get the potions ingredients right from underneath Snape's nose. The office was sure to be warded with many booby-traps not unlike an Egyptian pyramid. Just the thought of the raid thrilled Harry and he returned quickly to Hermione.

She was sitting there, busily working on updating her astronomy charts. A model of the solar system was rotating serenely on the corner of the desk. As Harry approached he noticed there was an ink smudge on her cheek from her hand pushing her hair away from her face.

Gently, he picked up one of her charts and glanced over it. Astronomy was one of the classes he'd dropped after getting his O.W.L.s. He hadn't seen the point in continuing taking all offered classes just to get his parents approval, it was only wasting his time when he could be working on other more important things.

“Hey, Hermione, do you still have your copy of *Hogwarts, A History*?” Harry asked putting the chart down and taking up his seat across from her again.

Hermione looked up, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear as she did, leaving another smudge of ink on her other cheek. “Hmm?”

“You look like you’re ready to do battle,” Harry commented, leaning forward and touching her cheek with the tips of his fingers.

Hermione looked at his ink stained fingers and hurriedly touched her own cheek. “Oh no!” she cried, staring at her blackened fingers. “Harry, do you have a handkerchief?”

Harry shook his head, pulling out his wand instead and casting a simple cleansing charm making the ink smudges disappear. Hermione touched her cheeks again and was relieved not to find ink on her hands. Her smile of thanks stirred something in his gut.

He cleared his throat and asked again, “Do you have your copy of *Hogwarts, A History*?”

“Of course I do,” Hermione answered, opening her book bag and pulling out a few shrunken texts. “It’s in my room. Just summon it from the common room.”

“Thanks,” Harry said, standing up once more. “I’ll see you in the common room after you’ve finished your homework and rounds.”

He walked around to stand beside her chair. He watched for a moment as she scratched something down in the corner of her astronomy notes before pressing a kiss to her temple. She blushed, quickly waving him away with a gentle scolding that they were in the library. Harry laughed and walked away.

He passed Daniel coming on his way in as he left. Daniel nodded coolly as he went by and Harry returned the gesture. Halfway down the hall he gave one look over his shoulder and caught sight of his brother disappearing into the back of the Defense Against the Dark Arts’ stacks.

Harry ignored the tightening in his gut and hurried through the castle to the Ravenclaw tower. As he past the singing armor from the week before, they broke into disjointed bawdy songs that hardly made a lick of sense. They were really only sing-shouting dirty words at this point. By the end of the week they would be silent unless somebody pranked them again.

The common room was bustling with of students from different years clustered in groups working on homework. Padma and Lisa brushed by him on their way out to find Hermione for some Charms help. Rebecca and Cornfoot were not so much studying in the dark corner of the room as they were playing tonsil Quidditch. Harry weaved through them all and stood at the base of the stairs leading to the girl's dormitories.

"*Accio Hermione's Hogwarts, A History!*"

Seconds later, Luna came flying down the stairs holding onto the book in question in one hand and her wand dangling in the other. She let go of the book two-thirds of the way down and landed lightly on her feet.

"That was more fun than my ride on the Jujubee on my sixth birthday!" she laughed, tucking hair behind her ears revealing dangling miniature light bulb earrings.

"Er...yeah, okay," Harry replied, holding onto the book.

Luna smiled cheerily. "Well, I'm off to find Ronald. He's dieing to know about the Zeppimarlen. They like toe jam and Ronald has lots of toe jam."

"Right."

"Come to think of it," Luna said tucking her wand behind her ear, "I like Ronald's toe jam too."

"Er...right," Harry muttered, repressing a shudder as he watched her leaving before going to take a shower. He never wanted to hear about Ronald's toe jam again.

Upstairs, he tossed the book onto his bed and pulled his robes up over his head. His glasses got caught and came off when the robes did, leaving Harry practically blind. He fumbled for them and slipped them back over his nose. Grabbing his towel, Harry made his way into the bathroom and shut the door.

Placing his stuff on the back of the toilet, Harry startled a spider out of hiding. It ran around in a panic, bumping into the walls repeatedly. Harry watched it, astonished by its behavior and took a step backwards. That seemed to calm the spider down a little bit and Harry reached over to turn on the spray, keeping his eyes on the spider all the while.

He watched as the spider squeezed itself out under the doorjamb, leaving Harry staring at the exit point in bemusement. As soon as the water was good and hot he stepped onto the cool tile. The deluge of water hit his chest and Harry ducked under the showerhead so his hair flattened under the pressure.

He exhaled and tilted his head upward. Steam wafted throughout the small bathroom as Harry took a nice long shower relaxing under the heated spray. He spent more time resting against the wall than anything else and was thoroughly relaxed by the time he shut the water off.

Idly, Harry traced his scar before slipping on his glasses and walking over to the mirror. He hadn't felt anything in a while and wondered absently what Voldemort might be planning. How soon until the next attack? Who would it be and why?

Harry studied his reflection in the mirror for a moment then cast a silent wandless drying charm and was pleased with its effects. His hair was only slightly damp now instead of the dripping wet it'd been when he first got out of the shower. It wouldn't take long to air dry.

Harry dressed casually noticing that he was much taller than he'd been at the end of the summer. The hems of his pants were creeping up his legs. He would have to let out the seems and darn some transfigured socks to lengthen the pant legs.

“Well if I fail to become an Auror I could easily become a tailor at Madam Malkin’s Robes for All Occasions,” Harry said to his reflection, giving it a wry grin.

He gathered his stuff and left, taking the time to place everything back where it went. Just before he finished doing so, Cornfoot came breezing in with Entwhistle talking excitedly. Harry watched them coolly from his position on the edge of his bed. He wasn’t over the team’s fool play from tryouts and personally thought a whooping by Hufflepuffs was just what they deserved.

“We’re going to cream those, Puffs!” Cornfoot crowed, smacking Entwhistle on the back. “They don’t stand a chance!”

“Blake’s going to steal the snitch right out from underneath that Zeller girl!”

Kevin nodded, sweeping back his hangings and flopping onto the bed. “Those Puffs haven’t won a game in years.”

“They’re not going to win tomorrow either!” Stephen asserted, grabbing some robes from the floor and sniffing them. “They’ve got too many newbies playing. Hey, Kev smell this. Does it smell clean to you?”

“What for?” Entwhistle demanded, ignoring Stephen’s outstretched hand.

Cornfoot grinned wolfishly. “I’m going to get Rebecca into a broom cupboard somewhere in the castle tonight. She owes me.”

Harry snorted. Poor Bradley, she’s probably going to think she was being kissed by the giant squid, rightly assuming Cornfoot’s pro at tonsil Quidditch was the end of his finesse. He turned away from them and closed the hangings, casting a silencing ward around his bed and began to read the introduction of *Hogwarts, A History* by the light of his wand. It was dreadfully dry and by the end of it, Harry couldn’t fathom why Hermione loved the book so much. He flipped to the table of contents and skimmed through it looking for anything on Headmasters, Headmistresses, and specifically their office.

He didn't find anything on their office per se, but he did find out some interesting things about it while looking up other subjects. Under 'Castle Portraits' the book mentioned that the ones of the Headmasters and Headmistresses were to help the current Head. They did this by observing all comers and goers and offering their advice when solicited and even when they weren't.

To Harry that meant that if they saw him in the office they'd rat on him unquestionably. Under 'Armor and Statues,' he learned that the gargoyle only ever opened if the password was stated. It could not be cajoled, transfigured, hexed, jinxed, or cursed. He'd have to be sneaky and get the password from Hermione without her realizing she gave it away.

There were some things not in the edition Hermione owned, that Harry knew about. For instance, Dumbledore owned a phoenix, called Fawkes. Phoenixes, weren't fooled by disillusionments or invisibility cloaks. Harry wasn't so sure he believed the bit on disillusionments, but just in case, he'd have to find some way around the bloody bird.

Time also wasn't on his side. There were wards that alerted the current Head when somebody Flooed, Owled, or came within proximity of the gargoyle standing guard of the stairs not to mention the ones in effect should he make it to the office where there was sure to be more. It seemed a feat almost unimaginable to complete without being caught.

Sighing, Harry shut the book and got up from the bed to go find Hermione. She was sure to be done with her homework and rounds by now since it was an hour and a half after curfew. He ambled down to the empty common room and reached the floor when the portrait door swung open admitting Hermione.

She looked flustered, with her cheeks red and her hair messed up. She looked like she'd been snogging in a broom cupboard. Harry felt a roiling in his gut and his face darkened.

"How was patrol?" Harry snarled, pointedly eyeing her appearance.

Hermione turned a darker shade of red. "Don't you dare accuse me of what it is I think you're accusing me of, Harry Potter! Your brother has already tried to persuade me that I'm only going out with you to make him jealous!"

Harry sneered, "And are you?"

Hermione threw her hands up in the air. "Boys!"

She tried to brush past him, but Harry caught her wrist. "I have the right to know if you're dating me to get to my brother," he growled, swinging her around. "After all we're twins! I look just like him--it's like practice."

Hermione jerked her wrist out of his grasp, thrusting her jaw out mutinously. She poked him in the chest and snarled back. "I would be dating your brother if I wanted to be his girlfriend. As it is I hexed him! I am also perfectly capable of hexing you too, Mister--"

Harry shut her up with a fierce kiss. She struggled against him briefly before changing her mind and kissing him back. He pulled away caught her gaze, his hand sneaking up through her long locks to rest at the nape of her neck.

"When--when did you hex him?"

"When he tried to take me into a broom cupboard," she said before stating defensively, "I came straight here after he tried it."

Tension eased out from Harry's shoulders. Next time he met up with Daniel, he'd get a hex or three in as well for good measure. Just what was his brother playing at? He was dating Ginny Weasley for Merlin's sake! Instead of voicing his thoughts on the subject he simply said, "Good."

"What? No, 'sorry, Hermione that I didn't trust--'"

Harry shut her up with another kiss, dragging her forcibly against him. She squeaked in surprise. The noise had him chuckling into her mouth. His laughter ceased and was replaced by a heated moan as she stood on tiptoe and rubbed her breasts against his chest. Her

fingers finding purchase on his forearms as she tilted her head backwards.

"I do trust you," Harry murmured. "I don't trust my brother."

"You really have to get over these insecurities, Harry," Hermione replied, licking his bottom lip.

Her actions had him wanting to hold her closer, to press his rapidly growing arousal against her soft belly. His fingers flexed, digging into the soft flesh of her waist, as Harry fought the urge to reach down and grab her arse to do just that, sure that if he did he'd get smacked for his efforts. He broke away from her mouth, dragging his lips against the underside of her jaw. She moaned softly, tilting her head farther back to allow him more room to maneuver.

"Harry," Hermione exhaled shakily, her hands gliding up to hold onto his shoulders.

"Hmm?"

"Don't stop," she commanded, huskily.

Harry nipped at her neck, his hands becoming bold and sliding down to firmly cup her delectable rear. She mewled appreciatively, sidling closer until there was no inch of space between them. Harry emitted a possessive growl as he breathed out hotly against her skin, causing her to shudder in delight. She was his, not Daniel's.

"Are you two going to fuck right here in the common room?" a female voice demanded from the bottom of the girls' staircase.

Hermione jumped away instantly, hastily rubbing at her lips as if to wipe away his kiss. Harry cursed, straightening up to glower at the intruder. It was Padma Patil.

"Padma," Hermione said guiltily, promptly turning her attention to the state of her clothes as she tried to fix them so that there wasn't any sign of Harry's attentions. "I have to go, Harry."

Harry threw an annoyed look at the Indian girl before saying, sharply, "No you don't; there's plenty of broom closets."

"I don't want to go to a broom closet!" Hermione stated shrilly, face flushed as she cast Padma a nervous glance before whispering loudly, "I'll see you tomorrow for the Quidditch match. Okay?"

She left before he could say anything and was quickly walking up the stairs with her friend. As they were disappearing he overheard Padma asking Hermione, "How could you let him touch you? He's so vile; always trying to steal Daniel's fame for himself. Nobody likes him Hermione."

"Bloody bollocks," Harry snarled, running a hand through his hair.

He'd never hated anyone more as he felt another pang shoot up his groin. His balls felt like they were trying to crawl back inside his body and getting crushed in the attempt.

Harry turned around and stumbled out through the portrait hole. He ignored the portrait's complaint about the hour and made his way down to the ground floor of the castle. He had something to do.

Casting a silent disillusionment spell, Harry waited until the runny egg feeling disappeared before acting. A *silencio* on the hinges ensured the old doors wouldn't creak in protest as he opened the massive doors with another piece of silent charm work.

He went in the opposite direction of the lake to get to the Quidditch pitch. The late November wind was biting cold. Harry had to cast two wandless warming charms layered on top of one another to keep out the late night chill. Soon he was by the Quidditch pitch and snuck into the Ravenclaw locker room.

Harry made a beeline to the Ravenclaw broom cupboard where a spider was twirling down to make a web. He bated at it impatiently and unlocked the metal locker. Inside were six old brooms and one shiny new broom, which obviously belonged to Blake. Harry was tempted to take the boy's broom out for a ride.

In the end though, he took out his old faithful Cleansweep, running his hands along the worn handle. Harry disillusioned the broom and placed it over his shoulder. Harry headed over to the other side of the locker room for a snitch.

Behind the mesh cage, Harry selected from the ball racks a single snitch. He took it out and watched it unfurl its white wings. He shut it down with a few taps of his wand and stuffed the tiny ball into his robe pocket.

Walking out onto the pitch, which was filled with silvery moonlight, Harry took up position in the center of the field. Harry tapped the snitch again with his wand, activating it.

When it unfurled gently in his hand, Harry released it into the air. He watched it gain height and hesitate. The snitch flitted around him once as if to get to know him before shooting off to the right. Harry counted to ten before mounting his broom and kicking off the ground.

From up above Harry could see more clearly the way the moonlight bounced off the goalposts, and reflected off the metal stands. He spent a long time circling the pitch doing lazy loop-de-loops and zigzags. He dived, practicing his Wronski Feint. The biting feel of the cold crisp wind against his face as he hurtled to the ground thrilled him and he forgot all about his issues with Cornfoot, Padma, and Hermione. The sharp spirals and corkscrews left him exalted and rejuvenated.

Finally, he began to look for the snitch.

Harry spotted no glimmer of light and searched in the shadows, which provided cover for the little winged ball. He flew close to the stands, searching the crevices between each of the houses and strained his ears for the flutter of wings. He was met with silence, but Harry waited undeterred.

It would come out, he knew. He just had to be ready for it. And at last, there it was, hovering near the bottom of the Hufflepuff stands. Harry flung himself forward over his broom and kicked off the Slytherin stands to go after it. The snitch darted around uncertainly before zipping off along the ground just above the tips of the blades of grass.

Harry plunged after it, flattening himself along the handle. The glittering golden snitch was getting closer and closer, as was the ground. Harry sharpened his focus and stretched out his arm, readying his body to pull out of the dive. Then cold metal hit his palm and Harry closed his fist in satisfaction.

Veering upward quickly, Harry knew that tomorrow the Ravenclaw team was going to lose. Blake couldn't beat Zeller, even if she was younger. Rose had been on the Hufflepuff team since her second year. This would be her first year as first string, but Blake didn't have the experience.

Harry leapt off his broom as it neared the ground and put everything back where it went. The moon was setting as he strode back to the castle. Luckily there weren't any classes tomorrow or he'd be miserable in the morning. Tomorrow he'd sleep in and visit with Serion, Oorjit, and Myrtle before the afternoon game. Get some brewing in if he could, or cast a stasis charm and hope the potion didn't foul.

He avoided Filch on the fifth floor by ducking behind a suit of armor and casting a silent *confundus* charm on Mrs. Norris. Every time she circled close to him, she'd find herself facing Filch and looking confused. The caretaker kept asking her what she smelled in a voice that went from positively gleeful to anxiously worried.

Carefully, Harry snuck around them and hurried up the rest of the way to the west tower. He woke the lady librarian up once more and slipped through, making his way up to his bed, where he collapsed tiredly and fell asleep; shoes and all.

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 11°«««°»»»°

Quidditch and more next chapter.

Happy Readings,

Meghan

Chapter 12

The crowds of students were screaming wildly around the pitch. The Slytherins were the only house booing the players flying around fighting for the quaffle. Hermione jumped up and down beside him waving her pennant back and forth furiously.

Harry never knew she was so excited about the game and had been disappointed to find out that her excitement was for house pride only. She hadn't a clue as to what was really happening in the game, but was cheering when the rest of the Ravensclaws did. Harry had tried to explain it to her, but one look at her confused expression, had decided it was best just to stop. She didn't get it and probably never would.

The Ravensclaw chasers were scoring fairly often and their score was steadily rising. Harry fervently hoped for one of them to get hit by a bludger and be knocked unconscious allowing Hufflepuff to even out the scores. The Puffs weren't acting brutal enough to win the match and Harry's hand started twitching towards his wand.

Suddenly there was a cry in the stands causing the Slytherins to scream their insults even louder, deafening the other houses. Harry's gaze darted to the Hufflepuff seeker and held his breath. Zeller was closer to the snitch and Harry silently cheered her on while his gaze darted to Blake who was coming up underneath the snitch.

Blake was gaining altitude. Harry urged Zeller to not look down at the other seeker. She'd miss it if she succumbed. The snitch shifted left, darting up and down between the two before zooming off. Harry groaned as Zeller turned too slowly and Blake came even with her.

Ravensclaws were on their feet screaming, going wild. The noise was incredible. If Blake caught the snitch, Ravensclaw would win by a landslide. If Zeller caught it, Hufflepuff would win by fifty points.

"Come on! Come on!" Harry screamed in frustration.

The girl had no excuse; she matched Blake in broom quality even though they were different makes. If she would just lean forward over the handle and will her broom to go faster, it'd all be over.

“Go! Go! Ravenclaw! Go! Go! Ravenclaw!” the students in the stand screamed, briefly drowning out the Slytherin harsh jeering.

The snitch dropped, plummeting to the ground.

“Shit!” Harry muttered, gripping his hair with both hands. “Free fall! Free fall!”

“Hufflepuffs score! 180 to 270!”

The Hufflepuff stand swelled, yellow and black fireworks shooting up from several wands to form a badger in the air. Zeller and Blake were neck and neck in a controlled dive. Harry growled and flicked his hand at the falling seekers. Zeller shrieked as her broom fell several feet. She was even with the snitch, if only she’d let go and grab it!

“Puffs! Puffs!

We’ve got the Stuff!

You Eagles had ‘Nuff?”

The chant rang out as Blake leapt forward, hanging off his broom by one hand. The broom tilted and he dropped several feet. Harry held his breath.

“Zeller get the snitch!” Harry yelled.

Several younger years turned around and yelled obscenities at him, but Harry didn’t care. He flung his other hand out. Blake’s momentum slowed and Zeller finally reached out and made a swipe at the snitch. She teetered on her broom unsteadily and was kicked by one of Blake’s flailing feet.

The snitch veered away and Harry muttered unfavorably. Blake got back on his broom and flew after Zeller. But it was too late, she’d caught the snitch. Hufflepuffs were flooding out of the stands. This was their first win in four years.

“--win by sixty points!”

The Ravenclaw stands groaned dramatically as their players hit the ground. Cornfoot was seen on the pitch yelling at Blake. The fourth year was bright pink and yelling back just as heatedly. Harry smirked in satisfaction, grabbing Hermione close in a happy hug.

"Harry, what's the matter with you? We just lost--oh!"

Harry pulled away and yelled over the noise. "That was a great match!"

Through the noise of the students a distinct conversation filtered toward them from somewhere to their left.

--gave the position to Blake to get Rebecca Bradley in a broom closet."

"How's that work?"

"She's Blake's cousin!"

"No joke?"

Harry glanced left quickly, unable to believe his ears. Hermione's hand gripped his fiercely in her own, her crown of bushy hair tickling his nose as she leaned around him to search for the speakers.

"No joke! I swear!"

"It worked then?"

"Like a charm!"

Hermione pointed discretely towards a pair of fifth years getting up from the bench a ways down. They disappeared into the throng of Ravenclaws making their way to the hidden stairwell. Harry watched them until they were out of sight.

He glanced back at Blake and Cornfoot still yelling on the pitch. As he watched Madam Hooch approach them, Harry felt his blood boil. So kicking him off his rightful place on the team had been about ensuring that the captain got a *chance* at getting laid.

“Fucking wanker,” Harry growled, fingering his wand. “I’m going curse his pecker off.”

Hermione’s fingers convulsed around his as she exclaimed, “You can’t!”

“Why not? It was one thing being a total jack ass; but this is quite another thing entirely, Hermione. The sodding bastard is going to get what’s coming to him.”

“It’s possible it’s just a rumor, Harry.”

“It isn’t. I heard him boasting about her owing him in the dorm,” Harry said, dragging his gaze from the now silent players to meet her own.

Hermione gasped, her hand covering her mouth. “No,” she breathed incredulously.

“Yes.”

“I can’t believe it’s true,” Hermione whispered, looking ill at the thought of such callousness.

“Believe it.”

“We have to tell Professor Flitwick! And Rebecca!”

“Like you did before? He didn’t do anything about Cornfoot’s decision to kick me off the team, Hermione, because the arsehole had backing from the rest of the team.”

“We still have to try.”

“You do what you have to do, Hermione. I’ll do what I have to do.”

“Don’t be stupid,” she said, pushing her hair back from her face and taking a look around. “There has to be an adult around here somewhere that hasn’t gone back to the school.”

Harry shook his head at her then grabbed her hand and hauled her behind him back to the school. He ignored her protests and only let

go of her wrist once they hit the entrance hall. She rubbed her wrist and glared at him before huffing irritably.

From the Great Hall Hufflepuffs could be heard celebrating as dinner came close to starting. Gryffindor students came over to their table to congratulate them on the win. Once Ravenclaw got over the loss, they too would go over and commend them on a game well played. Nobody expected the Slytherins to say anything unless it was negative and derogatory.

"Do you want to go eat with your friends or come with me?" Harry asked, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

Hermione glanced at her friends through the wide open doors and after a moment shook her head. "As long as we don't go and do something to get us expelled."

"Would I do that?" Harry said with a smirk.

"Should I answer that honestly?"

Harry took her hand, leading her down the stairs into the dungeon and through the corridor and second set of stairs to the fruit bowl painting. He stayed her with a hand. She looked between him and the still life, raising an eyebrow in question.

"Just watch," Harry urged, and then reached up to tickle the pear.

Hermione watched in bemusement until the pear giggled quietly and shifted into a handle. She leaned forward in excitement as if to touch the handle then paused and looked back at him.

"It isn't going to bite you," Harry chided gently, laying his hand on top of hers. "Go on, open the door."

She did and gasped. "Hogwarts uses house elves?"

Harry pushed her inside. "Of course, Hogwarts uses house elves. The school's been providing refuge for them since it's inception."

"It's still slavery," Hermione retorted before a contingent of elves came up to them.

"What can we do for you Miss Granger? Mr. Potter?"

Harry escorted Hermione to a stool as he replied, "We would like a little something to eat for dinner if you don't mind."

Swibby scurried forward and bowed. "Of course we don't mind, Mr. Harry Potter, sir."

The other elves scurried about, collecting food from the extras that didn't make it to the dinner tables upstairs yet. Within minutes a four course meal was set before them. Harry thanked the elves and dished Hermione and himself out a plate of food.

Harry dug into his beef casserole, peas, and jacket potatoes. He looked up to find Hermione picking through her meal in distaste. Harry frowned as he watched her shoot concerned glances towards the elves busily cleaning the kitchen and preparing dessert.

"Don't you like casserole?"

Hermione shrugged, and stuck a few peas into her mouth. "I couldn't possibly eat this, Harry, now that I know it's--"

"You're going to offend them if you leave the food untouched," Harry cut in, sternly.

"But--"

"They put a lot of work into it," he said and seeing she wasn't convinced ordered, "Eat up."

"Doesn't it bother you that these poor creatures are being forced to do this work for free?"

"They're beings, Hermione," Harry noted, dryly. "Not creatures. Creatures do not have the ability of speech. Don't go messing in something you can't possibly understand."

“What do you mean by that?”

Harry took another bite of his casserole and chewed. “What I mean, is that I can see the wheels in your head turning. The house elves will refute your attempts to *help* them because they don’t want it.”

“They just don’t know any better,” Hermione inserted, defiantly.

Harry rolled his eyes and stabbed at his potato. “Swibby and the others, like--no love, their place here at Hogwarts. They would resent your interference. None of them want clothes. Dumbledore makes sure that they’re treated well. Even better than they probably would want.”

“Can Swibby get yous anything else?” the house elf said, popping up beside them.

Harry picked up his glass of pumpkin juice and handed it down to the little elf. “I would like another glass, please. Thanks, Swibby.”

Hermione watched his interaction with the little elf and finally, if a bit resentfully, dug into her meal. Harry watched her eat with satisfaction and hurriedly polished off his plate and scooped up second helpings. Swibby returned with Harry’s freshened drink and Harry ordered dessert for the two of them.

They talked about Vector’s time turner project and Hermione’s dislike of the new creatures Professor Hagrid had them working with in Care of Magical Creatures. Harry laughed at the description of the oddly bred animal and said it sounded like one of Luna’s creations.

Hermione finished her plate and refused Harry’s offer of seconds. Harry shrugged, and collected their plates into a neat stack for the elves. It was briskly whisked away by three of them wearing little towels with Hogwart’s crest on them. Four more came by and set out another place setting before the two of them. Swibby came next and offered them a selection fresh fruit and chocolate dips.

Harry ate a chocolate covered strawberry and decided he’d have another. Hermione ate a few slices of bananas dipped in dark chocolate. He fed her a white chocolate covered raspberry and she

closed her eyes in delight. Harry watched in fascination as Hermione ate from his fingers a second raspberry and then a third. He especially liked the way she licked the crevices of her mouth, searching for hidden swirls of chocolate. She fed him a few slices of fresh pineapple, blushing prettily as Harry took his time sucking the warm drizzles of chocolate off her fingers.

"What do you say we get out of here and go to the Astronomy tower?" Harry asked, his eyes dark and intense.

Hermione grabbed his hand and practically tugged him off the stool in answer. They laughed and thanked the elves over their shoulders as they raced back up to the entrance hall. Halfway up the stairs, Harry slowed, listening to the ruckus still emanating from the Great Hall.

"Can you believe everybody's still at dinner?" Harry asked, climbing the rest of the way up carefully.

"Oh my word..." Hermione whispered, gripping Harry's hand tightly as they walked dazedly to the doorway. "What's going on, Harry?"

Inside the Great Hall hundreds and hundreds of owls flew through the windows. Feathers were flying everywhere as they collided into one another. Several owls swarmed around the professors' table and Harry noted grimly that most of them were dropping letters into the Headmaster's lap.

"I'm not sure," Harry murmured, tracking a large eagle through the hall that dropped a package in Draco Malfoy's lap.

A few boys and girls cried out in shock, staring horrified at the letters in their hands. Harry noted the black envelopes that theirs had come in as some broke down sobbing. Whatever was going on was bad and had to do with Voldemort because his scar suddenly flared up.

"Students are getting black letters," Hermione said fearfully. "Black letters were given out during the first war with Voldemort to relations of the deceased victims. He's attacked."

More students had letters dropped on their heads and it seemed as if the flurry of wings would never cease. A second wave of owls burst

through the windows. They dropped rolled up newspapers that ended up coated in several chocolate dips and fruits from dessert.

One snowy white owl drifted through the windows and flew towards them, distracting Harry from seeing what the second wave of birds had brought with them. Hedwig glided onto his shoulder and dropped a newspaper into his hand.

"It's a special edition, Harry," said Hermione unnecessarily.

Harry took one look at the blood speckled newspaper and knew Hedwig had wrestled it from a delivery owl. Quickly checking to see that his snowy owl wasn't the one bleeding, Harry ripped the tie off and unrolled the paper revealing the glaring headline, "YOU-KNOW-WHO ATTACKS SOMERSET COASTLINE!"

"Where? Where on the coastline did he attack? Does it say? Are there any survivors?" Hermione asked frantically, ripping the paper out of his hands.

"I don't know. I think it said he attacked from Basilbury to Liverford."

Hermione suddenly wilted. Harry caught her up and deftly placed her on the edge of Gryffindor's benches. Hedwig fluttered onto the table and watched him solemnly. Hermione was sobbing uncontrollably and Harry couldn't stop her. He grabbed the pitcher of water and silently conjured a cup without his wand.

"Drink this," Harry said firmly, pressing the cup into her left hand while prying her fingers from the special edition of the Prophet.

"D-do--do you think they're okay, Harry?" Hermione asked, tears running down her cheeks.

"Who, Hermione?"

"My parents!" she wailed, grabbing Harry's arm as she bent double, crying harder. "We live in Liverford!"

Harry sat down on the bench beside her and scooped her up in his arms. "You can--"

“Talk to the professors!” Hermione inserted with relief, wiping her dripping nose on the edge of her sleeve. “Great idea, Harry!”

“But--” Harry stammered as she pressed a quick kiss to his cheek and raced over to the professors. Harry glanced over at Hedwig and sighed, stroking her feathers. “That’s not what I meant.”

Hedwig trilled softly, twisting her head around to nuzzle his fingers. He shifted his gaze toward Dumbledore and watched the older wizard’s grim face as he shoved another pile of letters to McGonagall as he searched through the others. Dumbledore murmured something to Professor Snape, who nodded imperceptibly, a fierce scowl on his face.

There was a disturbance in the middle of the aisle and Harry swiveled to see what was the matter. Daniel was holding a flailing Hermione who was trying to get past him. Without realizing it, Harry was on his feet and beside them in seconds. He pulled his brother away and decked him as hard as he could while Hermione ran toward the professors.

“Ow! What the bloody hell did you do that for?” Daniel yelled, both hands coming up to hold his bleeding nose.

Harry shook his fist out, grimacing in pain. “What the hell do think? Just what were you trying to do with Hermione?”

Daniel pinched his nose and tilted his head back as the students nearest them watched in fascination. “She looked distraught. I was trying to comfort her!”

“That’s what she has a boyfriend for, you prat! She was trying to get information from the professors about her parents!”

Daniel dropped his hand and glared at Harry. “I’d be a better boyfriend for her than you ever could.”

Harry sneered, and punched his brother in the nose again. “You keep your fucking hands off of her, do you hear?”

Around them Ravenclaws gasped and Gryffindors stood to their feet to back their hero. Ron came up and pulled Daniel up from the floor, who was holding his nose again. The red head faced Harry and cracked his knuckles menacingly. Harry glared at them all from behind narrowed eyes.

“Harry!” Hermione cried, pushing her way through the group of Gryffindor boys to get to him. She lurched forward and clung to his neck and he dropped his gaze from his defiant brother to wrap his arms around her. “They won’t tell me anything, Harry! Dumbledore is going off to meet with the Minister Fudge and McGonagall doesn’t know any more than we do!”

“What did Flitwick say?” Harry asked, rubbing her back while staring hard at his brother.

Hermione shook her head, pressing herself further into his shoulder. “He--he gave me his condolences, like--like they were dead!” she hiccupped.

Harry pulled her away from the Great Hall as Dumbledore and Fudge swept back through, one restoring order and alerting the staff and the other fidgeting with his lime green bowler hat. Harry pushed Hermione through the crowded aisles, just as Dumbledore called for attention. Harry ignored him and the students retaking their seats, and held an arm out to Hedwig, who flew from the table to them.

“Come on Hermione,” Harry said gently, steering her up the flights of stairs, heading to their common room. “Let’s go write a note to them and send it off with Hedwig.”

“You think they’re alive?” Hermione asked desperately, staring him hard in the face.

“Undoubtedly,” he confirmed, guiding her with a warm hand on her back.

Hermione took courage from his words and pulled herself together. She grabbed his hand and pulled him up after her as she raced the rest of the way up to the tower. They hurried through the portrait hole out of breath with stitches in their sides. Hermione waved her wand to

summon quill and parchment which Harry caught as they hurtled from across the room.

As Hermione wrote furiously across the scroll, Harry walked to the window and talked softly with Hedwig. The great snowy owl hopped from his shoulder to his forearm, digging her talons into his skin.

“Don’t take chances with yourself, okay girl?” Harry murmured, stroking Hedwig’s beak. She bit his knuckle affectionately and blinked her big yellow eyes. “Reporters and Aurors are probably the only ones left in the area, but you still need to be careful.”

Hedwig hooted softly at him and Harry gave her a wane smile.

“I’ve finished it,” Hermione said, thrusting the letter in front of his nose.

Harry took the letter and tied it around Hedwig’s ankle. Hedwig hooted loudly and shuffled her feet ready to take off, but waited for the okay from him before doing so.

“Find my parents, Hedwig,” Hermione begged, her big brown eyes pleading with the snowy owl.

Hedwig hooted gently as she placed a kiss on her head. Tears spilled from Hermione's eyes again as she stepped back and wrung her hands together. Hedwig bobbed her head and faced her charge.

Harry lifted his arm and looked at his first and best friend straight in the eye. “Be swift, girl. Fly on soundless wings.”

She hooted in acknowledgement. Harry tapped her on the head with his wand casting a security charm on her head, followed by a short term notice-me-not spell that would last until she got to Liverford. Hermione opened the latch on the tower window and Harry thrust his arm forward.

“How fast can she fly?” Hermione asked worriedly, watching Hedwig fly off into the darkness.

“She’ll be back by morning,” he said, taking her hand and interlacing his fingers with hers. “She’ll have news from your parents too.”

Hermione looked over at him and smiled weakly. "Thank you, Harry."

Harry took in her haggard appearance, from her limp brown hair to her trembling knees and bloodless fingers gripping tightly around his own. He looked at her splotchy face and red rimmed eyes. "You're welcome," he said simply.

The portrait opened admitting Ravenclaws in by the dozens. Several were being helped by friends as they stared blankly around at them. Prefects were organizing everyone and counting heads to make sure nobody was left in the Great Hall. Hermione sank into one of the overstuffed chairs and put her head between her legs. Harry watched his fellow housemates silently as they talked in hushed voices and tripped up the stairs to crash in their beds.

Voldemort had finally brought the war home, straight to wizarding world's front door. Harry wondered idly to himself if people would rally together or fraction apart. If they'd learned from the last war what not to do. He knew they hadn't. Not really. Some students would push themselves harder, in an attempt to shore up helpful dueling skills. Others would disappear from the castle grounds and hide amongst their families.

He didn't worry too much about the fate of Britain's wizarding populace. Their action or inaction would determine what happened to them. But they would be looking at Dumbledore for hope and guidance or at his brother for another miracle. A miracle Harry knew his brother didn't have.

Harry sat down on the edge of the chair Hermione sat in and stared hard at the top of her head. Hermione would put her faith in them, he thought, his stomach churning. He shifted her into his lap as he took her place on the cushion. Her implicit belief in them worried him greatly.

They stayed downstairs after everybody had trudged up to their dorm rooms. He was content to hold her in silence. She fell asleep after many silent hours into their vigil awaiting Hedwig's return. Harry slipped into sleep unknowingly a few hours later, thoughts still whirring madly inside his head.

°««°»»°End Chapter 12°««°»»°

Chapter 13

It was a dreary evening and he was surrounded by the opulence of the dark-green and silver furnishings. There was no fire lit; the ashes cold in the grate. He didn't need light for he could see clearly.

He sat in an elegant throne-like chair. The arms were crafted to resemble silver snakes, baring fangs before a deadly strike. His hand curled around one of the hissing snakes in relish. A movement from the corner of the room attracted his attention.

§Nagini,§ he hissed in welcome, pleased at his familiar's arrival. Silver flashed off scales as she slithered toward him eagerly. *§Master, I have news.§*

§News, my dear?§ he asked, his red eyes watching the last of her approach.

She glided confidently up the raised dais and bowed her head slightly, pleasing him, before curling up around his chair. He stroked the crown of her head, marveling at the silky texture. She closed her eyes in pleasure, her forked tongue flickering between her jaws. Her eyes snapped open.

§All homes were hit. Your warning is prominent even from a great distance.§

A malicious smile curled on his lips. *§That is good news.§*

She dipped her head in agreement. *§Malfoy is on his way now to report.§*

§Good. Is there anything else you wish to inform me of?§

§He is currently plotting on how to alert you to Quigley's capture by the Auror contingent that showed up near the Grangers, presenting it so that he does not get blamed.§

§Quigley is expendable. He knows nothing, but I will have to remind Lucius of who he is dealing with.§

§Can I eat him, Master?§

He waved his hand dismissively. *§He still has his uses, but when they run out my dear, he is all yours.§*

She laughed sinisterly, and he reveled in the sound of her evil hissing. *§What shall we do next, Master?§*

§Now, dear Nagini, we can move forward on our plans to destroy the Potter
brat.§

§Yes, Master.§

He was pleased. Very pleased.

His scar was burning. It was the first clear thought that came to Harry as he awoke screaming. Disoriented, he felt soft frantic hands shaking him as he yelled his throat raw. He fought against the hands, batting them away as he lurched upright gasping for breath.

"Harry!"

Another spike of pain sizzled through him. Wheezing loudly, Harry doubled up in pain and clutched at his scar. Voldemort was feeling exceptionally cheerful and it hurt like hell. He bit his lip to keep from cursing.

"Harry!"

The hands were back, trying to pull him upright. Harry blinked his eyes rapidly, trying to dash away all the vision spots dancing before him. His spectacles were askew, dangling off the edge of his nose. He could barely make out the pale oval of Hermione's face as he struggled to sit up.

"Harry, are you okay? What's going on?"

Harry winced at her decibel level. Holding a hand to his head to soothe the pounding in his temples, he motioned for her to be quiet.

As he struggled to get his bearings, Harry resituated his glasses and watched Hermione come into better focus.

"Hey," he said hoarsely, his throat on fire.

"What happened Harry?" Hermione asked concerned, her hand on his shoulder squeezing hard.

"A nightmare," Harry muttered vaguely, slowly moving his head to look around the common room.

There was nobody else in the circular room, so it appeared that only Hermione heard his screaming. The sun hadn't risen yet, which meant that Hedwig couldn't possibly be back. The last vestiges of the fire still glowed in the grate on their left. He swallowed thickly trying to moisten his throat.

"Water?" he begged quietly.

Hermione reached for her wand and quickly transfigured the inkwell on the small coffee table into a glass. She banished the ink, cleaned the inside, and cast a low powered *aguamenti* spell to fill it with water. Taking the cup she pressed it gently into his hands.

Harry drank the water greedily until it was gone. She cast another *aguamenti* charm refilling the cup. He drank this one slower, finishing the glass with a sigh. "Thanks," he said handing it back to her to cancel the enchantments on it.

He watched as she did and couldn't help but think: why *after* the raids had happened, was his scar flaring up? Where were the warning tingles and spikes of pain? Why after two months of silence had he gotten a vision of Voldemort? Why now and not the night before the raids? Had something stopped the apparitions, the pains, the connection between them?

"That was some nightmare," Hermione said, breaking into his thoughts. She set the inkwell aside, soothingly smoothing her fingertips across his brow.

"Yeah, it was," Harry replied, closing his eyes as her fingers continued stroking his hair back from his face.

"You were screaming and thrashing, Harry," she stated matter-of-factly, giving him a hard glare. "What was it about?"

"Voldemort," Harry answered as he scrubbed at his face, missing the color wash from her own. When he looked up he saw her pallor, "What's wrong, Hermione?"

Tears spilled silently from her eyes. "Vol-Voldemort... he killed my parents, didn't he?"

Harry frowned, gathering her into his arms as she cried weakly onto his shoulder. "No," Harry said firmly. "No, he didn't. Hedwig took the letter, Hermione. She hasn't returned yet. Your parents must be alive somewhere." "What does that got to do with anything?" Hermione whispered, pressing her hot forehead against his neck.

"Owls are very smart familiars, Hermione," Harry murmured, cradling her head in his hand and running his fingers through her messy tresses. "They are the best animal to entrust with your letters and your secrets. They are magical in a way most magical species can never be."

"What do you mean?"

"Owls rarely ever take correspondence to persons in prison, or who have purposefully disappeared, or have died. Hedwig is even smarter than other owls. If she took it, and we were wrong about your parents' survival, she would have been back almost immediately."

Hermione shifted in his arms. Her body lying sideways against his chest and she was looking up into his eyes. "How do they know? I mean, how can they be so sure? How do they deliver letters in the first place?"

"Usually we give them addresses," Harry said with a smirk, "...or general whereabouts."

"No, silly!" Hermione reprimanded lightly, studying the underside of his shadowy jaw, "I mean when we don't know where people are."

Harry rubbed the leg Hermione had curled around his lap as he lectured. "Aura signatures mostly, though finding a magical person is easier because of our magic signatures are more distinctive."

Hermione digested the information as she stared out the window on their right. "You said Hedwig was cleverer than other owls. How?"

Harry beamed with pride. "She can get past spells that are meant to hide, disrupt, or block magical signatures."

"But my parents aren't magical, Harry. What if she can't find them? You said it yourself, muggles' auras are less distinctive than magical signatures."

"Stop fretting, Hermione," Harry counseled. "Hedwig can also find an aura no matter how feeble."

She frowned, looking down at her knees, before glancing back up at him. "How would you know?"

"I used her to find the Dursleys once," Harry said, then seeing her confusion he explained, "They're my relations on my mother's side, I wanted to meet them when I was twelve. Hedwig refused to drop another letter off to them after the first one because Aunt Petunia chased her out with a broom. I was picking the twigs out from her feathers for a week."

"And how would you know the state of their auras?"

"Auras depend on a person's level of acceptance and interest in magic or the unexplained. My relations emphatically do not believe in such *hodgepodge* as magic, so their auras are basically nonexistent."

"So the Dursleys are as *muggle* as they get?"

Harry nodded glancing out the window to check for Hedwig. "Pretty much."

Hermione looked as well, gnawing on her lower lip to keep it from trembling. Harry pressed a soft kiss to her forehead, and she clung to his arm, snuggling it against her breasts. She sighed closing her eyes before wrenching them open again.

"Harry, is that Hedwig?"

Harry jerked his head to the right and squinted through his glasses at the dark spec just past the snowcapped mountains. As it came closer Harry gently dumped Hermione from his lap and walked over to the window. She followed closely behind him, peering up and over his shoulder. As the spec moved closer it became whiter, and soon the strong white wings of Hedwig were visible in the distance.

"Is she carrying anything, Harry?" Hermione demanded and leaned fully against him so that he bore most of her weight.

"I think so. We'll find out shortly." He yanked open the window and flung the glass wide, banging it against the gray stone outside.

Hedwig flew in gracefully a moment later and dropped a hefty letter into Hermione's outstretched hand. She caught it with a sob and ripped the rubber-band off. Harry raised his arm to his snowy familiar as she flew over and landed daintily. He stroked her feathers, patting down the ones ruffled around her neck.

"You did good girl," Harry said, caressing Hedwig's beak. "Were they hard to find?"

Hedwig hooted a negative and Harry smiled. He thanked her for such a speedy return before glancing back at Hermione. Tears flowed down her face as she read the letter her parents wrote to her. As he watched Hermione, she sniffed a few times, her nose becoming very pink.

Hermione must have sensed his gaze, because she lifted her head and smiled widely, swiping at the wetness on her cheeks. She threw her arms around them both and squealed, "They're okay, Harry! Mum says they'd gone to London for a show."

"That's great, Hermione," Harry said as she let go and returned to reading the letter.

While she did that Harry took care of Hedwig. He summoned owl treats from his dormitory with a casual flick of his wand and deftly caught them in one hand as they flew into the common room. Harry offered several to his tired owl who gave a feeble hoot in thanks. He ran a few diagnostic spells on her to check for any manipulation. Finding none he placed his wand in his back pocket.

"If you can't make it to the Owlery, sleep on top of the bedpost in the room," Harry offered to Hedwig, whose eyes were making long, slow blinks, before she flew off to do so.

Relief and happiness were obvious in Hermione's voice and posture as she folded up the letter. "Remind me to buy Hedwig deluxe owl treats from Eeylops Owl Emporium... or anything she wants, really."

"I'll be sure to tell her the next time I see her. I just hope that barn owl has enough sense to leave her alone after her long flight. It won't be pretty if he gets in the way of her well deserved rest."

Hermione broke into giggles at his insightful prediction. He stared at her incredulously as she clutched her stomach and laughed deliriously. She crouched and fell back on her arse, hard, as she continued giggling like Barnabas the Barmy must have at seeing trolls in tutus. She was laughing so hard tears were rolling down her face.

Harry crouched down on his haunches and tried uncurling her arms from around her waist. He tried stilling her, but she fell backwards on the floor rolling this way and that. She would have looked adorable in any other given situation. As it was, she looked totally insane.

Harry did the only thing he could think of at the time: he swept down and kissed her hard on the mouth. Then gently, he slipped his tongue between her lips and reached out for hers. She hiccupped into his mouth and stilled under him. He grinned against her lips and tangled his tongue around hers as he slid his hand up the back of her neck and into her hair.

"They're alive and safe," he murmured, nipping at her bottom lip and catching it with his teeth and tugging.

"They're alive," she whispered disbelievingly, her eyes calming as the tension slipped away from her body.

"Yes, they are, and safe," Harry answered, punctuating his sentence with a lingering glide of his tongue against hers. She responded hesitantly and then more boldly, her hands coming up to rest at his sides, just below his armpits.

Several kisses were exchanged until Harry backed off a bit. Rubbing their noses together, he asked, "Feeling better?"

"That tickles," she commented, wriggling her nose against his.

Harry smirked, moving his mouth to just below her ear and blew. "How about now?"

She tilted her head to the side a little. "Not so much," she answered, raking her nails on either side of him down to his waist. "How about you?"

"Not a bit," he said, coming back to her lips.

She mewled against him, fingernails digging tighter into his hips. He groaned as she kissed him harder, opening wide for him. She broke it off, panting loudly as she repeated, "They're safe."

"Yes."

Hermione rested her forehead against his shoulder and laughed weakly. "I don't know what I would have done without you, Harry."

He sat up, smoothing down the sleeves of her robes as he did so. "Anytime, Hermione."

She followed him up, bringing a hand to his cheek. "Don't make light of it, Harry."

"I'm not," Harry said, standing up and pulling Hermione up after him.

"What do you think is going to happen today with classes?" Hermione asked, angling her face towards the sun as it crept over the Forbidden Forest.

"10 galleons says Dumbledore cancelled them," Harry betted, as several students came down both staircases.

"Sucker betting me, Mr. Potter?" she asked, grabbing her wand and casting several tidying charms on her person, then at his, to fix their clothes and hair.

"I won't deny it, Miss Granger. It's an easy call. We missed his speech last night, you know."

"I figured as much, this morning, right before you dumped me onto the floor and kicked me in the stomach," Hermione said, straightened her Headgirl badge as a warbling yarl sounded from the top of the stairs.

Crookshanks leapt down the steps in fours, running straight for them. The orange, mangy, half-kneazle yowled at Hermione, as if scolding her for forgetting him while she was grieving. He sat down on his plump bottom, waving his tail angrily.

"I'm so sorry, Crookshanks!" Hermione exclaimed, bending over and picking up the flat-faced cat. "I didn't mean to leave you locked up in the girl's toilet!"

Harry peered down at the glowering animal. "You had him in the toilets?"

"The other girls voted on his containment when I'm not around because he shreds their things in boredom. He must have come down after one of them, although I didn't notice any of them..." Hermione lifted her face out of Crookshanks' fur, towards the empty staircase.

Harry straightened up, reaching to give Crookshanks a scratch behind the ears. The half-kneazle hissed menacingly, and Harry jerked his hand away. "Friendly beast, too."

Hermione jostled Crookshanks, gently reprimanding him. "He's just being territorial."

Harry gave the cat a wry look. "Figures I would have competition."

She laughed, letting the orange fluff-ball drop from her arms so that he landed on his feet. "Really, Harry, the things you say. Let's head downstairs and see if Headmaster Dumbledore and Deputy Headmistress McGonagall require any assistance."

He muttered something unpleasant, but followed her out the portrait in spite of his misgivings. Students loitered in the halls. Friends comforting each other and whispering about what Dumbledore had said at the speech last night. Hermione got called into several conversations on their way to the Great Hall. Each time she calmed ragged nerves and answered questions. The latter she did remarkably well, considering she didn't have nearly the same amount of information as they did, having not heard Dumbledore's speech.

On the second floor, just outside the Transfiguration classroom, Malfoy stepped out of the shadows. In their usual manner, Crabbe and Goyle stood on either side of him trying to use their bulk and unfortunate looks to appear intimidating.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't Granger, the upstart mudblood."

"Watch your mouth, Malfoy," Harry said mildly, letting go of Hermione's hand and facing the trio.

Draco slipped his wand from his robes and held it loosely by his side. "Hello, Potty. Oh--excuse me, you're the *insignificant* Potter twin."

"Big word, Dray," Harry murmured, keeping his tone as placid as before, wholly unconcerned with the appearance of the Slytherin's wand.

The Slytherin grimaced in annoyance at the nickname, before recovering and sneering in presumed triumph, "I thought you'd be smarter than to hang around muggle-loving fools."

"And I thought you'd be smarter than to hang around psychotic Dark Lords," Harry replied. "But I guess we're both just these huge letdowns in the end. Shame really, we could have been best mates if it weren't for that."

"In your dreams, Nerdbird."

"Very clever, come up with it yourself, Dray? What do you want?" An expectant gleam shone feverishly in Malfoy's eyes as he peered at Hermione. Licking his lips, he asked, "Did you like the Dark Lord's warning?"

Hermione paled, and then flushed in turn. "You cowardly maggot! Can't you call Voldemort by his real name?"

"You calling me a maggot, mudblood?"

"Really, Dray, stop being so vile," Harry countered, stopping Hermione from responding in haste to the Slytherin's comment. "I know you can't really help it, but by now, I would have thought your mother would've taught you *some* manners."

"Oh I have manners, I just don't bother to waste them on the likes of you two," the Slytherin raised his left hand and soothed it against his slicked back hair.

"How utterly charming you are, *Dray*," Hermione replied, not bothering to hide her disgust and grabbed Harry's arm. "Come on, let's go, Harry."

"I'll be seeing you around Scarhead," Draco called as they turned around.

"Be seeing you, Dray." "Next time you write, send your parents my love Granger," Draco called as they started to go around the corner.

Harry grabbed Hermione's arm to keep her from hexing the little ferret. He forced her around the corner and pushed her down the hallway. "Keep moving Hermione, don't let him know he got to you."

"I hate him! I hate him! I hate him! To think he knew--he *knew*, about the attacks and didn't say anything!" Hermione screeched, her hands trembling and shaking violently.

"Dray's a little death eater in training, takes after his father. And even though I agree with you, there's no way to prove it."

"I should have hexed him! I should have taken points--assigned detention--something!"

Harry snatched her hands and held them firmly, pushing her back against the stone wall. "It's done. You handled him remarkably well. He gets under everybody's skin at sometime or another."

"Usually your brother's." Hermione took a deep breath, letting it out slowly.

Harry grinned, remembering the huge row from last year's leaving feast. "Yes, he does get under Daniel's skin rather well."

Hermione pushed past him, and he let her go. "I noticed Draco used the same nicknames on you as he does on Daniel," she said, glancing at him over her shoulder.

"What can I say? He's just not very original," he said with a smirk.

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 13°«««°»»»°

Chapter 14

Hermione abandoned Harry after breakfast that morning to do her head duties with Daniel, Dumbledore, and McGonagall. They would be discussing the new procedures that would be taking place late this evening in response to Voldemort's attack in Somerset, so as to alleviate all the parents worries about their children's safety. The conversation would involve traveling the breadth of Hogwarts and explaining each new security feature. Not a good thing to discuss with a junior marauder with a self-updating map of the school, Harry thought, but it wasn't his decision.

With all four of them gone on their campus tour, Dumbledore's office would be vacant. It was a perfect opportunity to risk his occupation as a student by raiding the Headmaster's office for dark art books. The chancy plan was made easier by the attack last night; Dumbledore had left a window open for owls delivering letters. Harry wouldn't have to get past the gargoyle.

He was tempted to send Hedwig in because one more owl wasn't going to trigger any warning bells with the Headmaster. However, the snowy owl was out on a hunt, so the point was moot. He figured he had only a few hours at the most and taking the fifteen minutes to get to the Owlery had wasted precious time.

Thinking on the situation, Harry gazed out of the smelly, owl dripping strewed tower searching for ideas. Across from him, he could see the Quidditch pitch. The Slytherin team was flying in their green and silver robes. They seemed not at all affected by the latest in Voldemort's campaign for Great Britain and eventual world domination as they were still practicing for next month's match against Gryffindor.

Harry saw sunlight flash off of Draco's potion enhanced hair and took a few moments to study the Slytherin in action. Malfoy had already caught the quaffle and flown toward the opposite side of the pitch when it came to him. Harry could take a school broom and fly it up to the open window! Easy and brilliant with little room for error.

Swiftly going down the tower's outside stairs, Harry crossed the grounds over to the pitch and locker rooms. He walked inside and

retrieved the Cleansweep without incident. A quick disillusionment charm on him and on the broomstick and he was good to go.

Dumbledore's office was directly across from the pitch and several feet higher up. The shortness of the trip would gain him some of time he had lost by going to the Owlery. Stopping several feet from the window, Harry closed his eyes and swiftly pulled his magic to the forefront. Two feet from the open window an owl perimeter ward had been set. Five feet closer to him from that was another ward Harry couldn't distinguish.

Frowning, Harry drifted closer towards the ward to examine its edges with his magic. Mentally, it was like touching a color. Physically, it was even trickier to explain. He poked the ward with a sliver of magic, but it did not react.

Cautiously, and a little disbelievingly, Harry raised his wand and said, "*Finite Incantatem.*"

The ward sizzled and disappeared with a soft pop.

"It couldn't have been that easy," Harry muttered to himself, changing his grip on his broom and flying a tiny bit closer.

The ward didn't reappear. Harry slipped past the old edge of the ward and pivoted sharply to watch the space behind him. Several seconds ticked by and nothing happened. Letting out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding, Harry faced the window again and moved forward.

He got rid of the alert ward for the owls without a problem and eased ever-so-carefully up to the ledge and peered through the window. Inside he could see Fawkes sleeping in his golden perch just behind the oak door. Beside the perch was a black cabinet slightly ajar with a silver glow permeating from it.

Across from the door was the Headmaster's claw-foot desk and high-backed chair on a raised platform. Behind the desk set between three tall and narrow rectangular windows sat four, very large and overflowing bookshelves. The shelves in the middle bookcase did not contain very many books, but instead a myriad of silver whirling

ornaments and a familiar tattered old hat which was snoring softly. A sword whose handle was set with glittering rubies rested in a glass cabinet a shelf below the sorting hat.

Above the bookshelves, in a continuous row, were the portraits of Hogwarts's previous headmasters and mistresses. They seemed to be quietly conversing with one another, slipping in and out of one another's gilded frames. Holding his breath, Harry raised his wand at a thin grumpy looking fellow with a hooked nose who was eyeing the next portrait with a beady look.

Thinking of the Latin for the charm he hoped would do the job because he hadn't had a chance to test it previously; Harry gathered the magic within himself and projected it. The man in the portrait continued to stare irritably at the man in the other frame. Harry took aim again and cast the spell on the occupant in that frame.

Neither man reacted as if anything was changed. The second man continued to search his reddened nose for an elusive booger while the other continued to watch. Harry grinned smugly and threw several more silent *nonanim advertos* at the remaining portrait inhabitants. They too continued about their business, blissfully unaware of anything.

Just as he began to ease himself over the ledge, clicking noises drew his attention to Fawkes. The phoenix was shuffling around on his perch, his talons making the distracting noise. Harry held his breath and wished that spells worked on phoenixes, but knew if an unforgivable could not, no mid-grade notice-not would stand a chance.

Fawkes dipped his head and tucked it back under a brilliantly scarlet wing. Harry drew breath again and carefully launched himself through the window to land lightly on the old patchwork floor carpet inside.

Harry held himself still as an arrogant hippogriff and waited. Fawkes continued to sleep and the portraits continued their pointless conversations. Now that he was inside, Harry could hear them better.

Three old witches gibbered on about schoolboy pranks that had taken place in the last week causing the hair on one poor unfortunate girl to fall out. The hooked nose was distracted from the nose-picker when a

stern looking woman asked him about his opinions on last night's attack. The nose-picker got upbraided by motherly butterball opposite him and he immediately stopped picking his nose.

Harry turned his attention away from them and keeping one eye on Fawkes, hurried over to the bookshelves. The engraving on the sword caught his attention and reminded him of the cup he still had in his possession. The sword however belonged to Godric Gryffindor instead of Helga Hufflepuff.

It was curious that the cup was labeled a Horcrux implying both extraordinary evil and great worth and sitting in Dumbledore's office was another artifact of one of the four founders. Were the artifacts themselves the Horcruxes? Or just the cup?

Harry stretched out a hand to lift the case and find a ward. It vibrated ominously, just centimeters from his fingertips. Retracting his hand quickly, he pivoted, and started browsing the titles on the leftmost bookcase. Amidst *The Magical Properties of Lemons* and *The Complete History of Pepper Imps* there was *The Dos and Don'ts of Evil Masterminds* by Drew Dalling and *The Monologue: Pros and Cons* by Galvin Binns.

Mindfully aware of the occupants in the room, Harry slipped the two books out of their spots and cast silent copy spells on their covers. He watched for a second to see that they were copying correctly and were not hindered by copyright spells or other protections. Satisfied that they were duplicating smoothly, Harry went back to browsing.

In the second bookcase Harry found a book by Dumbledore and took it down to examine. It was called *Dark Lords and Their Inner Childs*. Figuring it wouldn't be a complete waste of his time, Harry hit it with the copy charm and pulled out the next book in the row: *How to Love the Dark Lord in You* by Fergus Maddock. Harry bit his cheek to keep from laughing and put it back on the shelf.

The How-To for Dark Lords by Catriona Marsh and *Dark Hexes, Curses, and Jinxes that Should be Unforgivable* by Ogg Mortlake were taken from their spots and hit with the charm. There were several contemporary histories on Dumbledore and Grindelwald littering the third bookcase and even more on Voldemort, Dumbledore,

and Daniel. Harry one took down one and cast a copy charm on it. That book was *The Only One He Ever Feared* by Barry McGonagall.

The rest of the books were nothing attention grabbing and mostly about sweets. There was everything from recipe books to creator biographies and in depth tours of candy making factories. It appeared to Harry that Dumbledore had a candy obsession. Not finding anything of worth on the last bookcase, Harry returned to the six books busily reproducing themselves.

It came to him when he was flipping through the fifth book to check on its progress that the room had become too quiet. The sorting hat wasn't snoring anymore and the portraits had stopped talking. Carefully turning his head, Harry jumped at meeting Fawkes' beady black eyes. As they stared at one another, a trickle of sweat poured down the side of Harry's face.

He was in such deep shit.

Subtly checking his right hand holding his wand showed Harry that he was still under the disillusionment charm. The books were right then about phoenixes seeing through transparency and invisibility spell work. Harry brightened, maybe Fawkes thought he was his brother. They certainly looked alike and had scars on their foreheads. He'd pulled it off before.

Harry gave a little wave and a fake smile and ran his hand through his hair ruffling it extensively. Fawkes continued to stare and getting anxious Harry turned back to collect the almost finished copies. The first four were done but he had two to go before getting out of there.

As Harry waited, he watched Fawkes as Fawkes watched him. He fought the urge to fidget and tried his best to pretend he was really suppose to be there; the sweating did not help. The seconds seemed to tick by, though Harry really had no way of knowing. He didn't have a watch.

Harry glanced up at the circle of portraits. They were all staring with either a glazed over expression or were squinting hard in concentration in his general direction. He was sure they couldn't actually see him, but had to know something was amiss when the

books from Dumbledore's collection were levitating and creating copies of themselves.

He looked at the books again; five done now. Sweat trickled steadily down his back. His glasses were getting slippery and threatening to slide off his nose. He pushed them back up and ran his hand through his hair again for something to do.

A crunching churning noise rumbled through the room. Somebody was coming up! Harry glanced at the door in trepidation. Hurriedly gathering the five completed books, he stashed them haphazardly into their spaces only to go back and painstakingly fix them so their manhandling wouldn't be noticeable.

Come on, come on, he thought wildly, watching the final volume forge its last one hundred pages. He could hear voices in the small antechamber outside the doorway by this point, and though Harry couldn't make out the conversation, he knew it was only a matter of seconds before that door swung open.

Fawkes sat up regally and chirruped loudly. Bloody bird, Harry thought, panic-stricken. The last book finally finished replicating itself and smothering a cry of triumph, Harry picked it up and shoved it into the bookshelf as the door inched open. Hurriedly he shrunk and pocketed the copies and placed them in his robes.

"I understand, Mr. Robards," Dumbledore was saying as they walked through the doorway. "But I simply can not allow you to bring them onto school grounds."

"Professor," Robards said, sweeping along behind the headmaster, looking agitated. "I'm afraid I must insist. Parents want to know their children are safe and I can't afford to place two full contingents of Aurors here at the castle and another two in Hogsmeade. It is a waste of manpower!"

Harry slowly scooted around the desk and found himself clear opposite of the window. The door was still wide open, but there was no telling what Fawkes would do. Robards crossed in front of him and blocked his view of the Headmaster in his lime green robes.

"Hogwarts will not play host to Lammasu. You will either have to stretch your forces or come to another arrangement."

Robards slammed his hands on the polished desk, upsetting a stack of papers onto the floor. Harry looked down and his eyes practically popped out of his head. A corner of a black leather bound book with gold embossing was exposed under the toppled letters. It read, *The Hor...*

"Leave it," Dumbledore said sternly; conjuring a teapot as Robards hastily bent to retrieve everything from the floor.

"Yes, sir," Robards replied, straightening.

Harry edged back toward them and held his breath. Carefully he pushed the letters with his toe and grinned wickedly as the title was revealed; *The Horror of the Horcrux by Horatio Weatherby*. Finally, a book that would explain something about them. If only he'd known where it was when he had first arrived, it would have saved so much time.

"I would like to cooperate," Dumbledore stated congenially as he busied himself with preparing them tea. "But after the incident with the Dementors and Peter Pettigrew a few years ago, there's simply no way, in good conscience, I could let Lammasu near the students."

"But what if they stayed just outside the grounds?"

"One lump or two? Milk or lemon?"

"Huh?" the young man asked as he sat down in an oversized chair. "Oh! One and milk."

Harry crouched down slowly, in an attempt to minimize the shimmering outline of his body that would attract the headmaster's attention. If the Dumbledore caught him now, he was doomed for expulsion. When he was below the line of the desk, Harry stretched out his hand to try and grab the corner of the book. Robards shifted in his sit and nearly kicked Harry's outstretched hand. Sweat trickled down his heated face and Harry wiped it off on his sleeve.

"Lemons have all sorts of magical properties," Dumbledore said cajolingly, his hand hovering over the lemon before sighing and pouring the milk in the cup for the Head of Aurors.

"Thank you, Albus," Robards said accepting the cup.

"That's what Rufus Scrimgeour said when he brought the Dementors," Dumbledore stated, taking his seat as he got back to the conversation at hand. "You fill his shoes now because Minister Fudge has had him relocated due to the incident with Daniel Potter and a few other students."

Harry rolled his eyes at the mention of Daniel and made a grab at the book, but he hit the edge of a bound corner. It scooted farther away from himself and closer to Dumbledore. Damn. He narrowed his eyes and leaned forward slightly to try again.

Robards nodded, drinking from his cup. "Good tea, Professor," he complimented, shifting again causing Harry to drop his hand quickly once more.

"Thank you, Gawain."

Harry shuffled forward and this time boldly snatched the book and hobbled backwards, almost falling on his arse in the process. He didn't dare use magic and alert Dumbledore to his presence. Instead he kept the book low so hoped that it didn't look like it was being held and eyed his surroundings. Fawkes was still eyeing him like a hawk--er phoenix. His unwavering gaze was really starting to unnerve him.

The portraits, were focused entirely on the ministry visitor with the exception of hook nose who was glaring balefully in Harry's general direction. If only he could be positive that doing magic around the Headmaster wouldn't alert the barmy kook, he'd shrink the book and be gone.

"Lammasu are not Dementors," Robards pointed out, swirling his cup a little and watching the headmaster.

"No, they are not," Dumbledore agreed, throwing his beard over his shoulder and taking a deep sip. "You can't deny however, the many documented incidences of their violence."

Harry eyed Fawkes appraisingly and glanced at the window. If he crouched and shuffled carefully towards the door, he would remain out of sight of Dumbledore. His broom however was hovering just underneath the window and would get him away faster than his own two feet. Surely if he stayed low, he could cross the circular room and disappear the way he'd come through. The door on the other hand was closer.

"They have been tamed and are loyal--"

"Can you guarantee that, Gawain?" Dumbledore asked the Head of the Aurors, peering over his spectacles.

"Why--I--"

Harry shook his head at Robards position. Deciding on his course of action, he planned to get to and go through the door where then he would wait at the bottom for the gargoyle to open for Robards to come down from his meeting. Dumbledore would not be with him then and Harry was positive that Robards would be too preoccupied to notice his shimmering outline.

He moved forward on his haunches awkwardly. Fawkes ruffled his feathers in agitation but looked away. Relief flooded Harry at the sign of capitulation and with more confidence than before he hobbled to the door. Just as he thought he was going to make it out a postal owl swooped through the window and Harry watched it in horror.

"Strange," Dumbledore said, taking the letter from the tawny owl. "You should have activated the alarm."

Snapping his gaze from the scene, Harry got to his hands and knees and scrabbled forward quickly coming even with Fawkes. The scarlet phoenix eyed him smugly and trilled. Harry cursed the bloody pigeon as Dumbledore stood to his feet and bellowed at the room. The window snapped shut and locked. Harry stood and threw himself through the fast closing door.

He got caught in the doorway, his robes stuck in the sealed door. Harry turned around and yanked on them with all his might. A ripping sound filled his ears and suddenly Harry was falling backwards down the stairs, arse over elbow. The stairs jabbed at him all over until Harry knew he'd looked like a loser from a Quidditch match brawl. He landed flat on his back with a loud and temporarily paralyzing whump.

"Fuck that hurts," Harry wheezed, sitting up gingerly and bracing himself against the wall.

The book laid sprawled across from him and Harry summoned it and shrunk it, stuffing it into the side pocket of his robes. Clumsily, Harry got to his feet and heard a small thud. Frowning, he glanced down and saw the Horcrux book lying on the floor. He checked his pocket and sure enough it was ripped and the torn cloth continued along his side, leaving his robes breezier than ever. He looked up and saw the other books spread out over several stairs.

But Harry didn't have time to think about the other books as the door banged open and crashed against the stone. He scooped up the miniature book and raced over to the gargoyle. It didn't budge. Swearing heatedly, Harry cast about for the password.

What would Dumbledore pick? His familiar?

"Fawkes?"

The gargoyle didn't move. Thinking again Harry remembered the theme of the books in the bookcases. The Headmaster loved lemons.

Harry whispered, "Lemon!"

The gargoyle didn't budge and Dumbledore or Robards was picking his way down the winding stairs. Harry couldn't see him and the sound of footfalls grew louder. Time was of the essence. Harry thought back again and recalled all the candy titles.

"Ice Mice! Cockroach Clusters! Fizzing Whizbees! Jelly slugs!"

None of them moved the statue and Harry could see his pursuer's shadow flickering along the walls. It was Dumbledore! Harry clutched the book tighter in his hand and wiped his brow.

"Broomstick Gummies!"

A grinding noise issued from the gargoyle as it slid slowly open. Harry could see Dumbledore coming around the bend, beard flying. Harry squeezed himself through the slim opening, thanking Merlin for once about his short stature.

In the corridor, Harry broke out into a run. Shouts and stunners hit the walls in front of him and he ducked, narrowly avoiding a mysterious yellow curse that pulverized the stone floor in front of him. Harry jumped over the hole and skidded around the corner.

Panting harshly, Harry clutched his side. He was out of shape and tired, the stitch in his side twinging with every step he took. A loud crack sounded behind him. Harry slowed to a stop and looked disbelievingly behind him. The crack was definitely the sound of an Apparition!

"Don't be stupid, Potter," Harry growled at himself, taking a few more halting running half steps. "You can't Apparate on school grounds."

Harry watched over his shoulder as Robards and Snape skidded around the corner but Dumbledore was nowhere to be seen. He didn't bother to think about where Snape had come from as he swiveled his head in dawning horror as the next deafening crack sounded in front of him.

"Reveal yourself!" Dumbledore bellowed, his lime green robes swirling around his intimidating figure.

Harry dropped the book, banishing it to the Chamber with a wave of his hand. Dumbledore shot a spell at him and he sidestepped it hurriedly.

"Professor?" Snape sneered, coming to a halt on the other side of Harry, wand raised. "What are your orders?"

Robards stepped up beside Snape and held his wand aloft, squinting hard to detect Harry's shape. Harry let out a calming breath and concentrated on his magic, pulling it up through his veins until it shimmered along his skin creating goose pimples.

"What is that?" Snape asked, a shaky scowl on his sallow face as his eyes darting between Dumbledore and Harry's nearly transparent form.

Dumbledore sent a silent spell out from his wand. It shot fast and straight, aiming true and Harry did the only thing he could think of--he stepped into the void and felt his lungs burn and ache. A loud crack rang in his ears as his body squeezed impossibly small through a narrow tunnel.

Distantly he heard Snape bellowing, "Stupefy!"

As Harry was dragged into subspace, he knew both spells missed him. In an instant he was falling from several feet in the air, another loud crack heralding his arrival. He hit water with a splash and fell into the dark abyss.

Struggling in his robes, Harry kicked out trying to reach the surface. But he didn't know how to swim. It had been foolish of him to Apparate without a destination in mind. His lungs constricted as he flung his hands about wildly. Two dark shapes fell into the water above him. They were long bodied and sleek parting the water easily as they dived toward his sinking form.

Hang on! Orrjit hissed, folding back his wings and striking out with his tail.

§We are coming, Harry!§ Serion shouted, slicing through the water.

Blackness hazed his vision as his lungs forced his mouth open. Gagging on water, Harry watched bleakly as the two snakes whipped their tails around his wrists and tugged urgently. They were too small and he was too large.

His lungs burned as if they were on fire. He couldn't breathe. Harry kicked his feet urgently; he didn't want to die.

§*Use magic, Harry!*§ Serion hissed, struggling to swim upwards.

§*Use it now before it's too late!*§ Oorjit screeched, beating his wings in the water.

Rise, Harry said expending the last of his breath and falling into darkness.

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 14°«««°»»»°

Chapter 15

§Do you think he's dead?§ Oorjit asked, watching Harry's still form with trepidation.

Serion crawled up onto Harry's chest and sat there in a coil. *§He's not breathing.§*

Oorjit flew up into the air and drifted closer to peer into Harry's gray tinged face. *§Can we do anything?§*

§Like what?§ Serion snapped, *§We can't wake him; we're snakes!§*

§Hit him with your tail.§

§That'll work,§ Serion scoffed, but did so anyway before hurriedly slithering off.

Harry shivered, opened his eyes, and gagged on a mouthful of water. Groaning loudly, he rolled over and vomited. He braced himself on one arm, his wet black hair falling around his face. His throat was on fire and his chest heavy, constricting his breathing.

§Oh good, he's alive then.§

§I can't believe that worked!§

Harry coughed, spitting up more water. It came up like acid, burning his throat and nose. He kept dry-heaving afterwards, trying to regain his breath. His whole body racked with shivers from the cold seeping through his wet robes.

§Are you all right?§ Serion asked slithering into view and looking up into Harry's pasty pale face.

§Kill me,§ Harry moaned, flopping back over and slamming his elbow painfully into the stone floor.

§You'd probably look a right side better than you do now,§ Serion hissed, worry lacing his words as his tongue flicked out to taste the air.

Harry laughed weakly, nursing his elbow before covering his eyes with his hand. His whole body ached and his magic felt sluggish. He was tired, so tired.

§You came out of thin air!§ the occamy exclaimed, hovering and twisting above him.

Harry blinked his eyes slowly open and screwed his face up in thought. *§I am pretty sure that I Apparated.§*

§Aren't there wards against that sort of thing?§ Serion asked, curiously.

He nodded, rolling limply onto his side, peering at the two blurry snakes a few feet in front of him. *§Come glasses,§* he called unwittingly incanting in Parseltongue, barely raising a finger.

§I think they're lost--§ Oorjit started, but then stopped, his reptilian face turning toward the side.

They flew up from the water and glided to a halt in front of Harry, who tried them on and saw that they were scraped up beyond use. “*Repaïro,*” he whispered and with a wave of his hand they were fixed and replaced on his nose.

§So now that we've saved your life,§ Serion started, cocking his head to peer appraisingly at Harry's drenched form. *§Mind telling us why you Apparated and fell from the ceiling?§*

§I needed a book.§

§Oh, sweet, Salazar's snake,§ Serion cursed, shaking his head. *§You nearly killed yourself for a book. That's so like you to do.§*

§Is it?§ Oorjit asked shifting his scaly head to look at Serion.

Serion nodded sadly. Harry tried to glare, but couldn't muster up enough anger for it and sighed instead. He forced himself upright, and looked for his wand. It was lying inches from the water's edge. He stretched to pick it up, relishing the weight of it resting in his hand.

Using his wand to cast several strong drying charms on his person, Harry luxuriated in the blast of heat. He tried to mend the rip in his robes with sewing charms, but too much had been taken. Muttering darkly under his breath, Harry resorted to using a glamour to hide the long gash. He was going to have to trash the robes as soon as he could.

Straightening, Harry looked down at his reptilian rescuers. *§Did you see the book?§*

§What book?§ Serion asked. *§You mean that tatty black leather book that also fell from the sky? The one with gold lettering on it? That one?§*

Harry glared at the tiny green garden snake and nodded.

Serion pointed his tail behind him and said, *§It's over there, where it fell through Myrtle's head. She's quite upset.§*

§Wailed on and on about how nobody respects her delicate disposition,§ Oorjit added, recalling the fit the girl ghost threw as Harry stepped over both of them. His nostrils flared distastefully as he hissed, *§May I ask, to what delicate disposition was she referring?§*

§Tetchy, that describes her more aptly than delicate,§ Harry murmured distractedly, bending down and picking up the Horcrux book.

He examined it briefly before opening the front cover. Spidery handwriting crawled over the page, faint with age. Harry flipped through the pages examining the nearly indecipherable text. Midway through the book a yellow piece of parchment slipped out and floated to the floor. He bent over, picked it up and turned it over.

On it was Dumbledore's handwriting: *Trophies*. Frowning, Harry stuck the paper back into the book where it slipped from and continued flipping. Another scrap was nestled snugly in the crease near the top. It read: *Riddles, muggles, 16, diary*. On the backside in another color ink Dumbledore wrote: *Morfin Gaunt, pureblood, 30, ring*. Harry replaced it, mind working furiously as he idly flipped the rest of the

way through... one last scrap of paper was found near the back, blotchy and marked through. It read: **7, 13.**

§Why seven or thirteen?§ Harry mused quietly, closing the book and looking around.

Oorjit flapped his wings, shaking a few feathers loose. *§What are you talking about?§*

§Hmm?§ Harry said absently, focusing on the occamy. *§Oh, it's something Dumbledore wrote down.§*

§What's special about the numbers seven or thirteen?§

§Magically they're the strongest numbers for good and bad. Though technically good and bad are misnomers, relating to some fortunate and unfortunate correlating luck attached to them by foolish diviners and gullible muggles.§

§That explains that then; so glad you cleared that up for me,§ Oorjit replied dryly, swishing his tail.

Serion curled up one of the snake statues lining the Chamber and settled in for a nap. Oorjit shook his head at Harry and copied Serion. They were exhausted from saving their snake-human and needed to recuperate. Harry decided to let them sleep in peace and made for the snake portal to exit the Chamber, shrinking and placing a strong notice-me-not charm on the book.

When Harry made it to the surface of the school, he heard Myrtle sobbing wretchedly in the u-bend. Calling out to her, he apologized profusely for dropping the book on her and told her that he hadn't done it maliciously. Tears stopped running down her mottled cheeks as she attempted to smile at him. It came out sickly and more than a little leeringly, disturbing him a great deal. Hastily making his goodbyes, Harry escaped the girls' bathroom and raced back to the common room to find Hermione.

What he found in the Ravenclaw tower was nothing short of a surprising flurry of activity as the Heads present were dictating orders to all members of the house. Hermione was standing by the girls'

staircase while Daniel stood by the boys'; both counting heads as Ravensclaws marched downstairs. The common room had never been so crowded.

It was the first time since he punched his brother in the nose that Harry had seen him. His skin was discolored and his nose looked twice its usual size. Harry felt a wisp of smug satisfaction curl through him at the knowledge that Madam Pomfrey hadn't been able to fix his brother up.

He shifted his attention to the two adults in the room. Dumbledore and McGonagall were casting their considerable penetrating glares on the collected mass in hopes to cower them into insensible mush. Dumbledore's was surprisingly effective given the barmy grandfather image he usually portrayed.

As the portrait swung shut, McGonagall turned her head and barked, "Where have you been Mr. Potter? Go fall in line."

Dumbledore turned at her words and settled the full weight of his gaze on him. Harry fought the urge to fidget under that searching gaze. He tried to meet the Headmaster's eyes to show that he wasn't afraid and had nothing to hide, but immediately developed a tension headache and had to look away.

Harry merged into the collected mass of students and edge his way over to Hermione. He waited to speak until the last girl stepped off the steps and Hermione was finished with her count.

"What's going on?" Harry whispered, rubbing his temple to massage the pulsating ache.

Hermione looked at him, her brows creased together in puzzlement. "Where've you been, Harry? Dumbledore and McGonagall came in at half-past the hour. Dumbledore is furious about something, but nobody knows what. Daniel and I've been told to go and collect every Ravenclaw into the common room."

Harry knew what Dumbledore was furious about, but couldn't fathom how the Headmaster knew it was a Ravenclaw that had been in his

office. "I've been wandering the halls since you went off with the other Heads."

"We've been done for nearly two hours now!"

Harry shrugged, leaning against the wall, watching Dumbledore and McGonagall herd the younger years to the front. "How could I have known?"

Hermione gave him her own searching look before stating dryly, "And there was a castle-wide announcement to return to our dormitories."

Harry shrugged again and without changing his alibi, said, "I figure we'll soon find out why the Headmaster and his Deputy are here, wouldn't you think?"

Hermione leaned against the wall beside him and looked out at the common room. "The rumor is that someone broke the wards, or so Daniel told me when he came up with them."

Harry's lips twitched. He certainly had. Apparating on Hogwarts ground was suppose to be impossible, but Dumbledore had done it first, opening the way for Harry.

Harry's attempt had drained a lot of his magical core. The drain was nothing that would be notable in his regular performance, however he wouldn't be Apparating any time soon. Though of course his tiredness could be entirely blamed on his near death experience. Dumbledore, Harry noted beneath hooded lids, seemed to be bristling with energy and not at all affected.

Dumbledore raised his hand and the common room quieted down. Peering over his half-moon spectacles, Dumbledore locked gazes with several students in turn. "I found this," he said, holding up a length of ripped fabric and gesturing with it. "...in my office. Can anybody tell me whose it is?"

Harry's insides turned to ice and his mind stalled. A little voice in his head was running around and screaming, 'Oh, fuck. Oh, shit. Oh, damn.'

The torn robe fragment displayed his house colors proudly. No wonder, Dumbledore knew it was a Ravenclaw.

"It looks like a wadded up rag," Marcus Belby, a sixth year chaser, called out from amidst his group of friends.

Dumbledore concurred with a slight nod of his head, while McGonagall's lips thinned and her expression turn even more formidable. Harry forced himself to relax and felt the tension slip off his shoulders. He would not panic. Harry glanced around the circular room and vaguely wondered if he could cast an *arresto momentum* on himself after he jumped out the window.

"Indeed, Mr. Belby, it would appear so," Dumbledore said mildly, "It is however, a piece of Ravenclaw student school robes, as indicative of the blue piping on the pocket."

"So you're looking for somebody whose exposing themselves right now?" asked fifth year Stewart Ackerley, raising an eyebrow, failing to keep the smirk off of his face. "Why?"

"That would be correct," McGonagall replied tersely as the portrait swung open to admit their Head of House. "As for why, Mr. Ackerley, the student is in serious trouble for their actions. He or she will be taken to the Headmaster's office for a talk about what happened."

The younger students in the common room stifled some inappropriate giggling as a group of sixth year boys let out a low jeering noise. Harry rolled his eyes at the juvenile behavior and shifted his body closer to Hermione's to hide the glamour charm against her side, plans of escaping capture coming to a halt. He wrapped an arm around her waist and she relaxed against him, covering him perfectly. She flashed him a worried smile before shifting her attention to the new occupant coming into the room.

"Sorry, Albus," Flitwick squeaked, wiping his face with a sleeve of his robes and fanning himself. "Trelawney was making one of her infrequent visits to the lower levels and held me up."

"Not to worry, Filius," Dumbledore said, looking down at the small Professor.

Flitwick greeted McGonagall quietly before abruptly facing the Headmaster, who was staring directly into a fourth year's eyes and humming. "Are you sure it's one of my students?"

He watched as Dumbledore turned his face away from the girl to meet Flitwick's flashing blue eyes set deep in his wrinkly face. Funny, Harry thought, it looked like it had taken Dumbledore a great deal of effort to break away from the fourth year. The unwillingness to break eye contact piqued Harry's interest. Something more was going on beneath the surface; he just didn't know what.

As Flitwick and Dumbledore moved aside away from the collected mass and exchanged whispered conversation, Hermione tilted her head up taking advantage of the professors brief interlude. She tugged his head down at an awkward angle to whisper in his ear, "Something tells me, talking is not what our Professors want to do with the trespasser."

Harry dropped his head and pressed a light kiss to her forehead, not taking his eyes off Dumbledore. "Something tells me you're right."

Several minutes into the argument, their Head of House reluctantly withdrew and folded his arms over his tiny chest.

McGonagall shared a look with the Headmaster and addressed the assemblage of Ravenclaws. "Breaking into the Headmaster's office is violation that we cannot and will not tolerate. Do not make this harder on yourself, if you did it come forward now."

Harry schooled his features to reveal nothing about his inner turmoil and squeezed Hermione's waist. She sighed, staring out at her peers, indignation marring her smooth brow with a deep-set frown.

Dumbledore offered kind twinkling eyes and said with a benevolent spread of his arms, "Something was taken from my office. No doubt, a souvenir to share amongst the friends of the interloper. Alas, it is something dear to me and I must have it returned."

Harry snorted quietly. Hermione gave him a look and jabbed him in the side. He twitched under the painful prodding and grabbed her finger not wanting another painful dig. They exchanged a smoldering

glance; his gaze promising future retribution, hers promising more of the same.

As McGonagall continued to dress the house down in an attempt to get them to point out the culprit, the Headmaster turned back to face the room. Harry knowing now what he was looking for found it as Dumbledore's gaze sharpened and twinkled brightly as he looked into Lisa Turpin's eyes. Breaking the connection was like watching the laffy taffy (*the candy that gives you giggle fits!*) machine in Honeydukes pulling and rolling the wad of taffy in long clingy strands.

It was the same process as Dumbledore drifted from face to face. An unsettling disquiet welled in Harry as he observed the man in action. He was using magic, Harry was certain. Mind magic to be exact and wondered how he never noticed it before now. It wasn't like the Headmaster was doing this for the first time.

Harry remembered that tingling feeling in his gut. The unsettling feeling had always made him wonder if the Headmaster knew more than what Harry was telling. And he couldn't ignore the sharp twinges in his skull whenever he matched gazes with Dumbledore or Snape.

What they were doing had to be illegal. Most mind tampering magic was. The *obliviate* was restricted to a squad of authorized witches and wizards and even then it was only permitted to be used in enforcing the Secrecy of Magic Act.

Harry was sure there were books on it in the restricted section. There had to be some way to block what they were doing. He would have to find it and learn it well because there was going to be a time when Harry would be caught in those twinkling blue eyes and not be released. For now he scrutinized and memorized what was taking place so he could use his observations to help him with research.

At last Dumbledore reached them and stroked his beard. "Is there anything you would like to tell us, Ms. Ganger? Mr. Potter?"

They both shook their heads and the Headmaster frowned trying to catch Harry's gaze. But Harry was onto Dumbledore's tricks and deftly avoided the madly twinkling eyes. Several tense minutes when

by and having not succeeded in capturing Harry's eyes with his own, Dumbledore turned to Hermione.

"Very well," Dumbledore said at last, staring again at Harry. "Since none of you feel inclined to point out who among you is the troublemaker, I'm afraid I will have to ban all extra curricular activities."

"What about Quidditch!" Stephen shouted, pushing his way forward, looking suitably horrified.

Dumbledore shifted his attention, mild bemusement coming through his voice as he answered, "Yes, Mr. Cornfoot, Quidditch too."

"That's not fair!" Stephen and the rest of the team yelled out in unison as they flocked behind their captain.

"Really, Headmaster," Flitwick started, moving forward. "You just can't shut down our team, not without due reason, like the team being behind the break-in. I highly doubt they are part of this travesty--this conspiracy."

"Reason I have, Filius," Dumbledore murmured, his eyes flitting back toward Harry. "But, I suppose you are right. There was a witness to the thievery happening in my office."

Harry swallowed thickly, dreading the appearance of the witness who was sure to be Fawkes. He wouldn't be able to escape detection! Why hadn't he just stayed in the Chamber until this whole thing blew over? Because, he thought miserably, his absence would have been noted with suspicion.

Relieved, Flitwick demanded, "Then bring him forward. Let us settle this matter right now, Albus."

"Here! Here!" cried the Quidditch team and several other students.

Dumbledore inclined his head and closed his eyes. Flitwick at first looked confused but his expression cleared in understanding as he took a step back. McGonagall crossed the floor and joined the small

professor. At the end of her movement the air in the common room was instantly compressed until Harry felt his ears pop.

A song-like cry heralded Fawkes descent from the ceiling down to rest on Dumbledore's shoulder. Harry felt his body temperature spike and his pulse speed up in his throat. Carefully, he extracted his slightly damp palm from around Hermione's and rubbed it on his robes to dry it off before taking her hand again.

"Fawkes, saw the intruder through their disillusionment charm and can point the trespasser out to us," Dumbledore said, petting the bright red plumage of Fawkes breast.

Harry kept silent, watching Fawkes. The bird raised his beak loftily in the air and swished his tail feathers at Dumbledore's announcement. Black eyes found his easily in the throng and a smug twinkle lit up the phoenix's face. He forced the anxiety tensing up his shoulders to fall away and it dissipated. Harry met and matched the look in those black eyes, watching with his own smug smile as the phoenix did a double take.

Dumbledore fixed his gaze on a couple of fidgeting sixth years. "I would advise said thief to turn himself or herself in because this is my last offer for leniency. Fawkes will reveal who you are, it is hopeless to assume otherwise."

Harry never took his eyes off the red bird, mentally daring the creature to do just that. Fawkes trilled agitatedly, and swiveled his head to stare hard at Daniel, who was silently standing next to the boy's dormitories. Daniel shifted uneasily under the unexpected attention. Surprised by the phoenix's action, Harry could barely hide the shocked look on his face before Fawkes turned back and chirruped loudly.

Dumbledore stroked the scarlet bird soothingly. "Fawkes?" he prodded, reminding the phoenix what he was suppose to do.

Fawkes stared forcefully into Harry's eyes. Relaxing into it instead of avoiding it like he had with Dumbledore, Harry drifted. The feeling of feathers, soft as silk, drifted across his mind. He had to fight the urge

to close his eyes under the gentle touch and then the presence was gone and Harry felt instantly awake.

A deep wariness filled him as he held his breath waiting for Fawkes to act. He was taken by surprise again when the phoenix simply vanished into thin air. Dumbledore looked equally shocked by his familiar's actions. The look was quickly replaced by an intimidating air.

"Whoever you are," he murmured with deliberate calmness, motioning to Daniel, "Fawkes has decided to not expose you. Rest assured, however, that you will be found out."

"Sir! Sir, please!" Cornfoot shouted anxiously as the Heads started to file over to the portrait door at the far side from where they stood. "What about Quidditch!"

Dumbledore paused, hand on the frame, beard swung over his right shoulder. He gazed at the seventh year boy and replied, "My decision stands."

Loud protestations erupted from the students as they surged forward. One look from the Headmaster and they all fell silent. Grumbling broke out as soon as Dumbledore, Daniel, and McGonagall disappeared out the door. Flitwick stayed behind and shook his head sadly, his disappointment clear on his crinkled face.

"I would have expected better of my Ravenclaws," he squeaked, raising a hand to stop Cornfoot's anxious babble. "If you know who it is and are keeping silent, you are hurting your fellow housemates--"

"I love being on the Hogwarts Swim Team!"

"And I on the Hogwarts Knowledge Bowl!"

Flitwick nodded gravely at their outbursts. "We are a House--"

"I don't want to forfeit from Wizarding Chess League!" a boy shouted distressed. "I'm playing Ron Weasley for championship in the next match!"

"Same goes for me! I love Broom Racing! I don't want to quit!"

“Me too! I don’t want to leave the Gobstones Club!”

“Or the Exploding Snap League!”

“QUIDDITCH!”

The room broke into weak laughter at the declaration from a desperate Cornfoot. Their Head of House raised a hand to shush them and it slowly died out. They watched, breath held, for the Professor to finish his speech.

“We stand to lose much as a whole, do we not?” Flitwick asked pensively. “It doesn’t seem fair to punish the group for the crimes of one.”

“Here! Here!”

“Let me finish, please, Mr. Corner,” Flitwick reprimanded. “Ravenclaw might be known first and foremost for it’s intelligence, but that doesn’t mean we don’t possess the conviction of Gryffindor to do what is right, or the loyalty of Hufflepuff to its students as individuals and as a whole, or the self-serving of Slytherin to ruin for others what no one has the right to ruin. You have until tomorrow evening to come forward and after that I will enforce Dumbledore’s decision for the rest of the year, whether or not the Headmaster lifts it.”

“WHAT!”

“NO!”

“YOU CAN’T DO THAT!”

“Think on it,” Professor Flitwick said, “and do the right thing, like I know you will.”

And Flitwick was gone, leaving a disgruntled house to argue and shout amongst themselves. Hermione grabbed Harry’s hand and pulled him out after their Head of House. Once on the other side of the portrait she pushed him into an alcove hidden behind blue curtains.

“Miss me?” Harry asked, feeling great, his deception the least of his concerns now that he and Fawkes came to an understanding.

“Did you do it?” Hermione demanded, ignoring his cheekiness.

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 15°«««°»»»°

Chapter 16

He felt the smile slide off his face. "Do what?"

Hermione huffed, poking him in the chest. "Don't play dumb with me, Harry. I saw the Headmaster's phoenix stare at you and Daniel."

"So the bird looked at us. It doesn't mean I did it."

"Did Daniel?"

Harry stayed silent for a moment before speaking resignedly, "I wouldn't know."

Hermione sighed and slumped back against the stone wall. "Harry, I'd like to think I'm getting to know you, but you're going to have to let me in at some point."

"I do let you in," he protested, reaching out to touch her shoulder.

Hermione shook her head, stepping back. "You don't, not really." She paused and then looked up at him. "I'm not stupid, Harry, don't treat me as such."

"I know you're not stupid," Harry said feeling awkward with his arms held akimbo, unsure with what to do with them before finally settling on crossing them over his chest.

"Then don't treat me like I can't see what's going on!" she exclaimed, pushing her hair behind her ears, irritably. "You came in twenty minutes later than everybody else--after an announcement was made throughout the castle to return to your dormitories immediately--your hand was sweaty and you were anxious and tense. You got worse once Fawkes arrived and better when Dumbledore and everybody left. You have something to do with what happened this afternoon. I wish you would trust me enough to tell me."

Harry uncrossed his arms and ran his hands through his hair. He was tired, frustrated, and wanted nothing more than to go to bed and sleep through classes tomorrow. He looked up through the shield his bangs provided, studying her, looking for any sign of insincerity.

She met his gaze with her own clear and steady brown eyes. Harry wanted to trust her with his secrets and the desire warred with his head; logic telling him that some things needed to be hidden for the better part of valor.

Harry opened his mouth prepared to tell her everything about today's fiasco. "I think Dumbledore is using mind magic," he said instead.

Surprised at his bold statement, Hermione gaped at him before shutting her mouth shut with an audible click. Thoughts and feelings flittered over her face in rapid succession. Harry was only able to identify a few of them, the clearest one being disbelief. There was one though that had his pulse speeding up; it was trust. Trust that he would explain it to her, trust that he'd let her decide if it was factual or not.

"Okay, Harry," she said softly, crossing her wrists over her stomach. "What makes you think that?"

"His actions today in the common room," Harry said immediately, raising a hand and ticking off each indiscretion. "He met everybody's gaze directly, or tried to; when he moved from person to person, it looked as if leaving the person he was currently looking at was the hardest thing for him to do; and on top of that he called Fawkes mentally. Mind magic."

Hermione thought about that and slowly nodded her head. "Okay. So Dumbledore is what--a mind reader?"

"I don't think anybody can read a mind. It's not like our brains can be read like a book. We make all sorts of leaps of logic that don't make sense to anybody else and we connect different situations in crisscrossing patterns in an image another person couldn't understand. I really think it's like a surface scan for emotions and thoughts."

"Are you saying he could only pick up on things that have happened very recently? What about long buried memories or long lapses of time between events?"

"I assume old memories would only stand out when the emotions we tie to them are exceptionally strong."

"Or like light house beacons," Hermione supplied helpfully.

"Huh?" Harry asked, confused.

"Muggle reference--"

"No, I get that," Harry said, waving away her explanation of the term.

"I meant that the memories only get highlighted when certain things are triggered or to continue the metaphor, once for every rotation of the beacon in light house."

"We really need to get a book on the subject," Harry said, grinning.

Hermione agreed, leading the way out of the alcove. "Or an interview with somebody who can do what Dumbledore does."

"I think I might know who, but the likelihood of an interview is about as good as the Canons winning the British League."

"The Charlie Canons?" she asked, quirking a brow and turning the corner back toward the common room. "Boys and their Quidditch references. Okay, I'll... er... catch the snitch. Who?"

Harry hid a laugh behind a cough and smiled weakly at her pouting expression. "First, it's Chudley Cannons, and I think you meant to say snitchnip, because you're not a seeker. I'm actually thinking about Professor Snape."

Hermione stopped and stared at him. "Professor Snape?"

"Didn't you ever get the feeling he knows more than he should?"

"Well... yes, but mind magic?"

He gave her a look and steered her away from the portrait and back down the hall to the alcove. The librarian called out to them in warning that should the sounds behind the curtain sound like more than snogging she was going to go get a professor. Hermione turned

pink but Harry just smiled cockily at the portrait and pushed Hermione through the curtain.

“Why are we back here?” she asked, putting her hands on her hips, trying valiantly to subdue her blush.

“We’re not done talking about this and I’m pretty sure the common room is about thirty degrees cooler than when we left.”

“Or hotter.”

“Whichever.”

“They have a right to be angry, Harry. Someone from Ravenclaw just got the whole house on probation.”

Harry shrugged and leaned back against the wall. “It only hurts the ones involved in extracurricular activities. It’s not like the house was banned from taking finals or something that hinders their academic career.”

As Hermione processed that, her face turned a little green. “That would have been awful.”

“It’s not even like it’s a good system of testing knowledge anyway, Hermione, you know that. Besides, I don’t see what the big deal is.”

Hermione looked like she would protest his blasphemous declaration but decided against it. “So if Dumbledore and Snape can do this particular brand of mind magic, then we have to find a way to stop them from using it on us.”

Harry hummed an affirmative. “Sounds like a job for the Restricted Section. I’m sure I read about mind magic somewhere but glossed over it when I was searching for information on Horcruxes.”

“When you *were* looking for Horcruxes?” Hermione said, perking up. “Oh Harry, I’m so glad you gave up looking for stuff on that awful topic.”

"I didn't give up," Harry stated slyly as she continued to praise him for his restraint.

She stopped talking and frowned at him. "But I clearly heard you imply past tense. Did I hear wrong?"

"No, it was past tense," Harry said, pausing for a minute to consider things. "Can you keep a secret, Hermione?"

Her eyes widened momentarily before she nodded quickly and confirmed, "Yes, of course."

At her answer he pulled the book out from his pocket and simultaneously canceled the charms on it. "I found this book that's all about Horcruxes."

"It's so old," she murmured in awe, eagerly reaching for the book he held outstretched.

Hermione exclaimed over the leather binding and gold leaf, touching the delicate surface tenderly. Then she opened the cover carefully and squinted, trying to read the handwriting inside. Delicately flipping through the book, she shook her head at the foxing found on many of the pages and muttered to herself about looking for restoration charms.

Harry stifled an amused laugh. "You are such a bibliophile, Hermione."

She shut the book, clutching it to her chest, her eyes sparkling with excitement at something new to read and learn. "So, what if I am?"

He took the book back from her. "Don't worry your secret is safe with me."

"Oh, good," Hermione said, drawing nearer and tilting her head back so that she was almost kissing him. "I feel much safer knowing you would guard it with your life."

"I never said that," Harry countered, resisting the urge to close the last sliver of distance between them.

Hermione, however, did not have his strength of will and crossed that distance, running her hands up his chest and kissing him lightly on the mouth. Seeking entrance, she nibbled softly at his lips before gliding inside and tangling her tongue sweetly around his.

She stood on tiptoe and explored his mouth leisurely. Harry placed his hands on her waist and gently sucked on her lower lip. She moaned softly and briefly deepened the kiss before breaking it off and slowly falling back onto the soles of her feet. The movement caused his hands to skim up her body until they were resting just underneath the warmth of her breasts and her nipples pebbled against the black robes expectantly.

He breathed in deeply, momentarily paralyzed by the possibilities rising between them. Possibilities he was eager to explore but was sure she wouldn't. His palms grew damp from nerves and his pulse raced erratically in his veins. He waited for her to pull away and held himself very still, half-afraid that one wrong move on his part would send her running.

But she didn't run and Harry found that his heart of its own accord had relocated itself to the base of his throat. Their gazes locked and several seconds ticked by until it sunk in his lust addled mind that she wasn't pulling away from him and breaking the moment.

Static electricity built up between them as he caught her gaze. Hermione bit her lip nervously, uncertainty written clearly on her face. Then a trace of desire flashed in her eyes, answered by something primal that flashed through his own. Something he couldn't control and he became bolder. Harry took the initiative and deliberately touch her. Her breath caught in her throat as he grazed the edge of his thumb over her pert left nipple.

"Harry..." Hermione breathed hesitantly, her hands moving on his arms to stop him.

"Hmm?" he murmured, running his right thumb over the other one, enjoying the sensation of her nipple tightening further because of it.

"Never mind," she said, her voice catching in her throat on the last syllable as he did it a third time.

Slowly he moved his hand up to fully cup her breast. Harry watched, fascinated as her lashes fluttered shut and her mouth parted as her breathing changed and quickened. He took the opportunity to capture the other one. Her lashes trembled as his name escaped from her lips.

Carefully, he explored the shape and weight of them in his hands; lifting and squeezing and caressing until her head fell backwards, spilling her hair out behind her in a voluminous wave. She clutched at his forearms, using them to balance herself as she pressed her body into him.

Harry studied the expressions on her face as he touched her. His fingers trailed up to her throat and fanned there briefly before sliding beneath the warm weight of her hair. Her tongue darted out and wetted her lips before disappearing behind pearly teeth. He bent his head and caught the plump lower lip, collecting her sighs into himself.

His other hand slipped from the curve of her breast down her side, slipped past the soft hollow of her waist, over her hip and down to the bend of her knee. Pulling her tightly against him, Harry ate at her mouth. Her hands came off his arms and up between them, weakly pushing against his chest as she made a soft protesting noise.

“Harry...”

Reluctantly, Harry broke off the kiss, his harsh breathing matching hers. His nose bumped gently against hers as he let out a groan. Hermione licked her swollen lips and stared up at him. He closed his eyes against the look in them and slowly eased away from her trembling form.

He blew out a sigh and ripped off his glasses. He raked his hands through his messy black hair and pressed his palms against his eyes, trying to calm the frantic beating of his heart. A soft hand touched the fist he had made around his glasses.

“Harry?”

Harry lowered his hands and blinked at her blurry form. "Hermione," he croaked, much to his horror. He cleared his throat and repeated her name.

"It's much too fast."

Harry nodded and stared at a spot over her head, the feel of her breasts etched firmly in his mind. "Sure..."

Hermione bit her lip and shook her head, flinging her bushy hair everywhere. "It's not that I didn't like it--"

"Okay."

"But, I'm just not ready for that..." Hermione trailed off, wringing her hands.

Harry nodded again, scuffing the toe of his shoe against the stone floor. He slipped his glasses back on his nose for something to do. As she talked his gaze drifted over to a corner to watch the frenzied movements of the spider nesting there.

Hermione focused on her feet, nervously tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "The stuff in the beginning was good...no great... I wouldn't mind more of that."

"Yeah... okay--wait--what?" Harry's focus snapped to her again as she gulped and shifted her gaze from the floor to his face.

"I said," she started, pausing to wet her lips, "I liked you touching me... you know... there."

"And?" Harry asked, watching her fight the raging blush in her cheeks.

Hermione tilted her chin up defiantly and said in spite of her embarrassment, "And I wouldn't mind if you did it again."

Harry broke out into a grin. "Would it be too juvenile to say, wicked?"

Hermione broke into weak laughter. "Wicked isn't a very good descriptor, I don't think."

“Well then, how about, spectacular?” Harry asked, feeling cheeky once again, as he ruffled his hair.

Hermione gave him a look that said he was using weak adjectives again.

“Cool?”

Hermione shook her head.

“Er... totally awesome?”

Hermione stuck her hands on her hips, biting her lip to keep from laughing. Harry shrugged helplessly, stuffing his hands into his pockets, before remembering the glamour and hastily extracting them, hoping that she didn't notice the magic hiding the hole.

Finally, she took pity and exclaimed, “It was bloody brilliant, all right!”

“You cussed, Hermione,” Harry teased, wrapping an arm around her shoulder and steering her out of the alcove.

“Don’t look so chuffed,” she responded mildly, fighting her own grin.

“Of course not,” he agreed just as mildly, as they headed back toward the common room.

As they slipped by the portrait, he shot the librarian a knowing smirk and laughed at her irritated huff. Hermione shoved him through the portrait hole, imitating the librarian with an exasperated, “Boys!” Harry laughed, turning around to help her through.

“Just wait until next time, Hermione.”

She glared at him momentarily before breaking down into giggles. “What makes you think there’s going to be a next time, Mr. Potter?”

“Are you saying there won’t be?”

Hermione tried to look stern but couldn’t pull it off. Harry beamed, a feeling of excitement building in his chest. He couldn’t wait to pull Hermione into a broom closet between classes.

0««0»»»0End Chapter 160««0»»»0

Chapter 17

Two weeks had gone by and December had settled on the castle, chilling the corridors and students alike with bitingly cold winds that whistled through the castle. In a surprise twist of fate Ravenclaw had been found innocent. Apparently when the Headmaster and his Deputy entered the Headmaster's office after leaving Ravenclaw tower, Dumbledore had handed the torn fragment of Ravenclaw robes to McGonagall. As a Transfiguration Mistress, she had immediately detected the spell work on the cloth and had countered the transfiguration to reveal a new set of colors beneath the blue and bronze piping. Gryffindor red and gold winked brightly at both of the Heads, setting off a scandal that rocked the foundations of the school.

The surprise development had left Gryffindor and Ravenclaw at odds to say the least. It was turning out to be worse than the Gryffindor and Slytherin rivalry that had been the political make up within the school for over a century. If it wasn't for Daniel Potter being a Gryffindor, the whole house was sure to have been the pariah of the castle, much like Slytherin used to be.

Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff were both shocked at the blatant favoritism shown by the Headmaster towards the Gryffindor house; they were not threatened with probation or any other form of penalty. The unfairness of the situation struck a cord within the loyal badger house and it had thus thrown its support behind Ravenclaw. Slytherin took this chance to come back into the school and still thumb their noses at the foolish Gryffindorks.

In school, McGonagall was suddenly showing blatant favoritism toward her cubs, rivaling anything Professor Snape had ever shown his snakes. Transfiguration was quickly becoming the class most students dreaded taking and as it so happened, school work and test scores suffered accordingly.

In potions, just the opposite was happening and scores were rapidly rising as interest once again fell on the topic. Professor Snape even seemed...nicer... if such a word could be applied to him. Professor Flitwick was being viewed as the teacher McGonagall used to be, developing the reputation of a scrupulously fair teacher to all students.

Ravenclaw had been determined to beat the shit out of Gryffindor on the pitch and had succeeded in devastating the lions with a score of five hundred and forty to ninety two days earlier. Ron, red-faced with anger and humiliation, had been forced by Madam Hooch to shake Cornfoot's hand after the game.

The Slytherins were still laughing in the halls over that. They had even come up with another theme song for the Weasley boy, which did nothing to cool the enmity. Prank wars escalated, lining both Zonko's and the WWW pockets with galleons.

As for Harry, he sometimes had to stop himself from smirking at Daniel. Who knew taking hand-me-downs from his twin would have worked out so well? But Harry did not care to get involved with the house rivalries and most of the time he ignored his house's bristling tempers and bad moods; he had other things to do.

Amidst research and homework projects, Harry kept his promise and sequestered Hermione away for multiple sessions in broom closets all over the castle; never the same one twice. Without fail, his arduous suggestions caused a slight blush in Hermione's cheeks as they stole away for another passionate session.

Tonight, however, they weren't participating in a midnight rendezvous. Harry and Hermione found themselves in an empty classroom, instead of in a broom closet, examining the Hufflepuff cup. Though right now, a broom closet session sounded better to Harry. He had not been able to shake a bad feeling about this night.

His bad reaction to the cup had not escalated, but it showed no signs of weakening either. Hermione, on the other hand, didn't seem to cause a reaction from the cup at all. At first, they were both confused by the lack of feedback between her and the cup until Harry theorized that further contact with it would finally induce the *desired* response.

"You shouldn't touch it, Harry," Hermione warned as he reached out to pick it up from the table.

"I'm not sure I want you touching it either," he said, ignoring the sizzling zap from the cup. "You know what the book says."

“So that makes it all right for *you* to hold onto it?” Hermione said, fixing her large poofy bun. “Don’t forget I too read the book and the wizard’s notes in the margins as much as you did.”

During one of their late night study sessions in the library Harry had confiscated the yellow parchment slips, claiming them to be his old bookmarks, before she could read them. He couldn’t do anything about Dumbledore’s notes in the margins, and passed those off as some other scholarly wizard’s additions to the book.

He had even convinced her not to bother Dumbledore about the cup when he had presented it to her one night last week. He explained to her that the object had been the reason behind his avid research. When she asked about the origin of the cup, Harry fudged the story and diverted the topic towards its history as a founder’s object. He didn’t care if she fully believed that story or not, it was better than the truth.

“All it means is that the Horcrux has an affinity for me and reacts accordingly,” Harry lied, down playing the situation as the cup bucked in his hand.

“Fine, be stubborn about it Harry, but tonight we’re destroying that thing. It’s evil and shouldn’t be allowed to exist.”

Harry fought the cup and eventually had to set it back down on a scarred desk to keep himself from being burned by the now hot metal cup. Wiping his hands on his robes, he inquired, “I take it you found a way to save the artifact while destroying the fragment of soul inside?”

Harry hadn’t told her that the fragment was almost certainly a piece of Voldemort’s soul. That would have had her even more anxious to take the Horcrux to Dumbledore than she had been in the first place. As it was, she was still bent on destroying such evil magic.

It would have also called his story into question and he didn’t fancy having to explain that he had lied. He had overheard horror stories about other boys being caught lying. They had made him shudder and thank Merlin he never had a girlfriend. He wasn’t sure what had changed his mind.

Hermione pulled out her wand. "Yes, I believe I have. I designed an alternative spell to the incantation in the book."

"Hold on!" Harry protested. "You're not going to randomly start tossing spells at that cup until you run them by me! I don't want you to get hurt!"

"Oh honestly, Harry," Hermione huffed, shooting the spell at a desk chair instead of the cup to prove its *safety*. "See? I've been working on this spell for the last week. I'm positive it'll work."

"I still think I should be the one to do it, besides a chair is not the same as an evil, soul infested chalice that's over 400 years old," Harry said, crossing his arms over his chest and trying to send a Snape-glare at her.

Hermione shook her head and raised her wand again. "Stop being a baby about it. The book said anybody could destroy a Horcrux."

"Don't be obtuse, Hermione. The book also didn't say anything about the consequences to said person after destroying a Horcrux. I'm worried about the magical backlash."

"Stop worrying, then. I'll test it right now. *Avedo Kaodavrea!*"

"Hermione!", shouted Harry as he jerked towards her.

Mesmerized, Harry watched in horror as the sickly yellow-green spell hurtled toward the dormant cup. When it hit the Horcrux, the spell enveloped the object in a blaze of colorful fire. Pressure seemed to emanate from the Hufflepuff cup and it began to build in the room.

Harry tried to run over to Hermione, but his gut tightened in terror as the pressure exploded outward. Hermione cried out in fear and pain as she was flung sideways into a wall. He screamed her name as the yellow-green light flooded the room, blinding his vision. Abruptly, her screams cut off and Harry felt bile rise up in his throat.

"Please, don't let her be dead!" he thought, fighting against the waves of magic hurtling against him.

Scrambling through the fading light, Harry fell to his knees beside her still and pale form. He shook her shoulders hard, screaming for her to wake up. Frantically he felt for her pulse and nearly collapsed in of relief when he found it.

Harry clutched her to his chest and stood up with her in his arms. He ran for the hospital wing, praying his stupidity wouldn't be the death of her. He should have done that spell! He should have done the original spell--the priceless cup be damned.

She was so cold! Blindly, Harry ran through the halls, ignoring shouts from Snape and Filch along the way. Her chest rose and fell against him with her strangled breathing. He had to get her to Madam Pomfrey immediately!

He felt his magic pool in his veins and fought the need to Apparate. The nurse would be extremely suspicious as it was; he didn't need to give her the ammunition that would lead Dumbledore straight to him on top of that.

Harry flew through the infirmary calling out for Madam Pomfrey at the top of his lungs.

"What on Merlin's green earth is going on out here--" she demanded, coming out of a side room. "Mr. Potter, please explain yourself!"

"Hermione, she's hurt!" Harry answered quickly, racing to a halt in front of the school Healer.

"Miss Granger?" she asked, worriedly, plucking her wand out and casting several diagnostic spells at once. "What happened?"

"She was trying out a new spell and it backfired," Harry replied, trying to make sense of the colors and annotations lighting up about Hermione's body.

"Her vitals are bad. Put her on a bed, Mr. Potter," Madam Pomfrey said, directing Harry to the beds on the left of the ward.

Harry did so quickly, depositing Hermione onto the nearest bed. Madam Pomfrey shoved him to one side so she could get closer to

her patient. He stayed close, wanting to be near Hermione, but Madam Pomfrey was soon exasperated with him and with a spell tossed him back several feet.

"I need space to work with, Mr. Potter, and you're hovering isn't going to help. Now, tell me what type of spell she was testing. Can you remember the exact words she said?"

Harry shook his head, not wanting to divulge the spell Hermione used. "It was a counter-curse I think and meant to undo something. That's what she said, at least. It came out as a bright yellow-green spell. I'm not sure of what she said, though."

Pomfrey tsked and tutted, whisking her wand over Hermione again and said conclusively, "She's concussed. Did the spell reflect?"

Harry nodded, saying, "Yeah, it did. We were both flung into the walls. It was a powerful bit of spell work."

She flicked her wand, sending several blue threads into Hermione's ears. "Were you in a classroom, practicing for N.E.W.T.s?"

Gratefully, Harry latched onto the idea. "We were; wanted to be prepared for everything. They're coming up fast."

"That's the problem with this testing system. Every year, I get more and more students in here needing more calming draughts and headache drafts and Pepper-Up potions than the year before. They cause too much stress on you lot."

"They do decide our future within the community," he said simply. "Is she going to be okay?"

"We shall see," Pomfrey said, creating a bubble that encased Hermione's nose. "Right now it looks like the damage is only from the magical backlash that caused Miss Granger to hit her head. The blue threads will tell me more in a few hours. There could be more serious spell damage."

"Her breathing is also constricted, which is why I put the bubblehead charm on her. There's nothing to do now but wait it out. Why don't

you go back to your house before you get in trouble for being out past curfew, Mr. Potter.”

“Can I stay a bit longer?”

She looked at him, taking in his woebegone state and the worry evident in his gaze. “For a few minutes, but then you have to leave.”

Harry nodded gratefully and used his wand to conjure a wooden stool. He placed it by the head of the bed and sat down. Harry looked down at Hermione’s pale features and gently grasped her still hand, holding it carefully in his own.

Thoughts whizzed around his head faster than a Fanged Frisbee and held more bite. He let his eyes roam her face as he tried to organize his thoughts. The bubblehead charm distorted her appearance every time she took a breath, waving and blurring the air above her nose.

A small pit of emotion lodged itself in his stomach, causing his mouth to go dry. She had to be okay, just had to. He closed his eyes against the sight of her and rested his forehead on her cool hand.

He shouldn’t have let her cast the spell; who knows what the Horcrux had done to her? Harry pressed his lips to her lifeless fingers and debated telling Madam Pomfrey about what she could be dealing with when it came to Hermione. It would get to Professor Dumbledore and he’d be expelled, but then they might know exactly how to cure her.

“Time to be going, Mr. Potter,” a soft, firm voice said behind him.

Harry nodded and gently placed Hermione’s hand back on the bed and stood up. Glancing briefly at the Healer, Harry bent down and brushed his lips against her forehead and straightened.

“When can I come back tomorrow?” he asked, placing his hands in his pockets.

Madam Pomfrey angled her head, thinking. “After the first of the morning classes would be a good time to come back.”

“Thanks,” Harry said and turned walking out of the infirmary.

Harry went back to the classroom and gathered their belongings. In the back of his mind, he wondered what went so wrong with her spell. Hermione wouldn't have made such a drastic mistake. She was meticulous and thorough, every detail checked and double checked before application.

Harry reached down to pick up the still humming cup, but yelled and dropped it as it burnt his hand. He looked down at his blistering palm and shook his head. Harry grabbed a corner of his sleeve and tried to pick it up. The cup hummed ominously and bucked. He dropped it immediately and growled at the stubborn cup.

Angry and upset, he thrust his wand forward and cried, "Annullo
Pravus!"

The cup emitted a whizzing, high pitched noise as the spell hit it. The menacing hiss reached an earsplitting volume before going silent. He blinked, waiting for the ringing in his ears to stop. Satisfied, Harry cast an *accio* at the partially melted cup. Catching it, Harry yelped a second time as the metal became scorching hot and a nefarious black liquid squirted up at him, hitting his glasses and eating through them at an alarming pace.

"Ugh!" Harry muttered, dropping the cup. "Bloody hell!"

The acidic substance was dissolving the frames, creating a molten mess on his face. Harry whipped his glasses off his nose and tossed them onto the desk. Glowering at the thing responsible for the loss of clear his sight, Harry kicked the cup, which made a tinny sound as it scuttled across the floor.

"Blasted thing, what the bloody hell is wrong with you?"

Harry waved his wand at his glasses and muttered the repairing charm to fix them and replaced them on his nose. They were worse for the wear and were more than slightly off now. He squinted, trying to bring things in focus and sighed in disgust when it didn't happen.

He flopped onto the stool and tapped the desk. An angry frown marred his brow as he pondered the situation. His face finally cleared

when he reached a conclusion. Pulling from his pockets the pieces of scrap paper on which Dumbledore had wrote, he smoothed them out and studied them as he had done in the past out of Hermione's eyesight.

Harry thought he understood two of the clues now that he had read the book. It was obvious, reading the second scrap of paper, that Harry had come in contact with two other Horcruxes: the diary and the ring. He was also fairly certain that while the book claimed that a wizard could only make one Horcrux, that Voldemort had found a way around that and for some reason, Dumbledore suspected Voldemort had made either seven or thirteen of the things. That meant that Harry had had destroyed two of Voldemort's Horcruxes. Sadly, he had no idea how to duplicate those naïve and rather fortunate experiences.

But even still, Harry didn't understand was what Dumbledore meant by trophies. What did trophies mean? It had something to do with Voldemort's Horcruxes. Maybe the headmaster was thinking Tom used a trophy within the school to be the object of one of his Horcruxes.

However, there was nothing in Dumbledore's scribbings about how to properly destroy a Horcrux. It was also obvious Horatio Weatherby didn't know how to get rid of one or didn't want to.

Harry waved his hand and caught the Horcrux book and flipped through it. There had to be something he and Hermione missed; something that could explain the dismal failure that was the attempted the destruction the Hufflepuff cup. He scanned Dumbledore's notes repeatedly until he found the jot in the margin that had been particularly illegible. It was as if it was written in a hurry and had consequently suffered in translation.

Frowning at the blotched writing, Harry waved his wand experimentally. Harry put a little more power into the silent spell and the results were the same. Several more tries yielded nothing and frustrated, Harry muttered disparagingly at the note. He glowered at the little snake decoration on the top of the page until it shimmered and danced before his eyes.

§Become legible, damn it!§

Surprise flowed over Harry's features as he realized that his Parseltongue command was being followed. Not only being followed but taken to a level that Harry hadn't specified. Dumbledore's notes cleaned up and thickened and the faint script forming the text of the book grew thicker and darker.

Did the book only respond to Parseltongue? He tried another command, changing Dumbledore's ink color to red. He switched it to blue in Latin (so speaking in Latin works too?) and frowned in thought. Harry vaguely remembered calling out for his glasses in the Chamber of Secrets after Apparating. Could he do other incantations in Parseltongue as well?

He muttered at the door and waved his hand, sealing the door with a single word. Shock registered, before he was overwhelmed with giddiness. He could do things with this aspect of magic that the Latin couldn't do! He could refine spells, cast them quicker, and even make up his own charms and hexes!

The euphoria passed as he remembered the Horcrux and Hermione. Quickly scanning back through the pages he saw that the magic had followed through and cleared up the entire book. Skipping back to the page he had been on, Harry glanced at Dumbledore's written inscription.

A Horcrux must be a vessel. Literally or theoretically? Must it hold something tangible? Must the Horcrux be solid?

"A vessel," Harry murmured, before glancing at the cup. "How does that explain the others though? Is it more theoretical?"

He flipped further in the book and found nothing new. Closing the book, Harry bit his lip in thought. If the diary and ring were Horcruxes, how were they vessels? He supposed, looking at it from a more intangible viewpoint, that a diary held thoughts and memories because it was what one would record inside it. The ring too could be a vessel as it held a finger.

“Hello, Harry,” Myrtle simpered, startling him from his thoughts as she flew up through the floor. “You told me to come get you when the potion is ready for the final series of ingredients before the stasis charm.”

He stood up, saying, “I’ll be down, shortly. Please watch the potion and let me know if it turns slimy.”

“Okay, Harry,” Myrtle said sweetly, drifting through the floor while humming to herself.

Harry shook his head and collected everything, hurriedly gathering the cup and forcing it into his back pack, and took off. Down in the Chamber, Harry dropped the bag near the snoring snakes and crossed into the lake-flooded room. Myrtle was drifting a few inches above the floor with her chin resting on her hands while she sat cross legged staring into a steaming cauldron.

“So what’s happened,” he asked as he dropped down beside her.

“It crossed from yellow-gold to ultramarine and started steaming,” she said, glancing up at him as he tied the bandana around his hair.

“Ultramarine?” Harry repeated, eyes widening as he peered into the cauldron.

She straightened, pushing her glasses up her stubby nose. “I know you thought it should be a deep green, but I think this is better than you could have hoped for after changing the potion around.”

He frowned and picked up a spoon to scoop out a little of the potion. Examining it up close, he sniffed it, searching for something that might tell him the potion fouled. It seemed fine so Harry dumped it back into the smoking batch below and noted its consistency.

“It’s much too thin. It was supposed to be thicker.”

“Maybe,” Myrtle said, leaning over the cauldron to look with him, her pearly touch his making him shiver. “But only in theory. You could have been wrong about this, after all the Bubotuber pus could be reacting differently due to the presence of the fluxweed.”

He hummed thoughtfully, pondering what she said before leaning over and picking up his potions notebook. Reading over the previous observations he reluctantly agreed with the girl ghost and reached over to grab the last of the ingredients.

Carefully adding one Devil's Snare root at a time, he watched for unprecedented growth from the cutting. They quivered before shriveling up and dissolving in the fairly acidic potion. The potion fumed sludge bubbles that popped with a wet splurting sound, their residual gunk landing mostly on the floor and sometimes on him. Ignoring it, he added pieces of crushed lionfish spine and stirred clockwise for eight counts before going anti-clockwise for three. He repeated this for eleven sets.

Finally the potion thickened, draining of color, becoming like lumpy water. Proudly Harry placed the potion on low heat and placed the whole potion under a light time-slowing charm. He had finished with the brewing faster than his original estimates.

"You're done," Myrtle said, watching Harry with a morose look on her face.

"It appears so," he agreed with a smile, cleaning up the leftover potion ingredients and packing up the rest of the kit. "I should be able to drink it in two days. If it works, I'll experience a brief transformation. Hopefully I'll stay transformed long enough to know what form I will have to work towards under a controlled situation. Then all I have to do is practice until I achieve the change."

Moaning Myrtle smiled briefly before asking in what she thought was a coy manner, "Will you be practicing here, Harry?"

Harry blinked at her, repressing a queasy look from reaching his face at the meaning behind her words. "Er... yeah, I guess so."

"Oh, good," Myrtle stated with relief.

"Yeah--I got to get going, curfew has gone into effect and I'm going to have to sneak as it is."

"If you get caught, I'll cover for you Harry."

Harry's cheeks reddened. "Thanks, Myrtle. See you in a couple of days."

He turned abruptly and scurried out of the Chamber, briefly pausing to scoop up Serion on his way out the piping under the girls' sinks. The tiny snake curled around his wrist, basking in Harry's warmth as they stole from the girl's toilets and climbed five floors to get to the Ravenclaw common room.

A group of Ravenclaws were scheming over a piece of parchment when he walked through the portrait. They were whispering excitedly and looked up at him only long enough to identify and disregard him. He ignored them and made his way to his dormitory. His dorm mates were either snoring or finishing up homework scrolls and didn't pay him any heed.

Uncaring he slipped into his pajamas and slunk through the curtains of his bed. Harry slumped against the pillow, beating it into a hard ball and placing his head on it. Serion slipped off his wrist and curled beside him, near the wall.

§You are awfully pensive,§ Serion commented.

§Hermione and I tried to destroy the Horcrux this evening.§

§I take it that didn't happen.§

§No, she's in the infirmary unconscious.§

Serion flicked his tongue out for a few seconds before stating grimly, *§Does the Healer think she's going to be all right?§*

Harry shrugged, shifting onto his back staring at the top of his four poster. The dark blue and bronze pattern swirled gently, looking like dim galaxies and constellations. *§She wouldn't say, but I think so. I mean it was just a bloody spell rebounding, it's not like it could cause that much damage.§* He was silent for a beat before adding, *§Right?§*

§I wouldn't know,§ Serion hissed softly, trying to soothe his human friend.

§Maybe she'll wake up tomorrow,§ Harry said hopefully.

§The girl seems strong.§

Harry looked over at the green garden snake. *§Hermione is strong.§*

§Then she'll be okay.§ Serion waited for the silence between them to stretch before asking, *§Still think you're animagus is magical?§*

Harry took off his glasses and closed his eyes. *§Naturally.§*

§I hope you turn into a flubber worm or one of those blast ended skrewts.§

§Funny,§ Harry said, scrubbing his eyes with the back of his hand and yawning. *§I expected you to want me to turn into a pygmy puff.§*

§It would be more humiliating for you to turn into a magical creature that was disappointing in stature. I could go for a fire slug. Maybe you should become one of those.§

§I'd transform back while in your stomach and rip you apart.§

§You could try,§ Serion retorted brashly.

§I think I'll pass,§ Harry hissed, falling asleep.

§She's going to be awake before classes tomorrow. You'll see§

Harry nodded sluggishly into his pillow. *§Good-night, Serion.§*

§Night brat.§

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 17°«««°»»»°

Chapter 18

Standing in an empty classroom, Harry wondered at his sanity. Gingerly, Harry picked up his wand and aimed it toward the gleaming Hufflepuff cup as Serion watched on in dismay. Harry knew what had gone wrong with getting rid of the Horcrux earlier. It had come to him while he was sleeping; he had only been able to destroy the other two after the object's craving was satisfied. He was going to attempt to destroy the Horcrux alone.

The diary wanted thoughts and memories and it was only after Ginny had started filling Tom Riddle's diary with them, that Voldemort's soul lessened its hold and thus weakening itself. The same went for the ring.

The ring needed the male heir of a pureblood family to put it on, and Daniel had done so. The ring didn't care that Daniel was half-blood, just that he was heir to the pureblood Potter fortune. The weakening of Voldemort's hold on the Gaunt ring triggered the Horcrux and the soul tried to possess the nearest host. It was during the confusing in-between stages of transfer between the Horcrux and the living host that the soul could be destroyed.

§You're an idiot.§

Harry grimaced, shifting his grip on his wand. *§Thanks, Serion, I'll keep that in mind.§*

§A real imbecile.§

§Shut it,§ Harry growled.

§You do realize there's a high risk of your impending death trying to accomplish this right?§

Harry scowled. *§Your point?§*

§It's also very Gryffindorish behavior on your part to be doing something so brash,§ Serion added with obvious disdain.

§Tell me something I don't know.§

Serion flicked out his forked tongue. *§You might live through this catastrophe.§*

Harry sighed, *§That's something I don't know.§*

§Well, I thought being optimistic was the way to go back there,§
Serion said, slithering up onto a nearby table and curling up to watch.
§You could also die.§

§Gee, thanks,§ Harry said wryly, lowering his wand to look at the green garden snake.

§Explain to me what you are doing once more,§ Serion demanded, as he eyed the cup wearily.

§The cup holds liquids,§ Harry stated with a sigh, ruffling his hair with his free hand. *§Something must be drunk from it. I'm going to try water first.§*

Raising his wand again, Harry cast a silent *aguamenti* at the cup. Water filled the cup to the brim and stopped. Apprehensively, Harry reached out to pick up the cup, holding his breath for the inevitable jolt. It didn't spark at him.

His hand was shaking slightly as he brought the lip of the golden cup to his mouth and drank deeply from it. It tasted like metal. Finishing the water, he placed it down on the table. Serion watched him and they waited. Nothing happened. A small wave of relief washed over Harry before he frowned.

§So not water,§ Harry muttered, scratching his nose. *§That tasted really gross too.§*

§Blood?§ Serion offered.

§Fuck,§ Harry said with feeling. *§Damn arcane shit.§*

Serion shifted uneasily, flicking out his tongue. *§You could bring the cup to the Headmaster and not worry about it anymore.§*

§Oh, right, I can just see that now. Mr. Potter, where did you get this? Are you in the service of the Dark Lord?§

§The idea has merit. If you did, you won't have to--§

Harry conjured a blade and cut himself swiftly along one arm.

§Cut yourself open,§ Serion finished dryly.

Placing his arm over the cup, Harry squeezed just above his elbow and watched the blood flow speed up and pour into the basin. The cup started shaking, hissing and emitting lemon-yellow smoke.

§Don't drink from it, Harry,§ Serion pleaded suddenly, gliding over to the whistling Horcrux.

Harry patted the crown of Serion's tiny green head. *§Somebody must, and it is my blood.§*

He reached out to grab the cup when Serion lashed out biting his hand.

§Ouch! You slithering idiot! Be glad you aren't poisonous or I'd rip off all your scales!§

§Take it to Dumbledore,§ Serion beseeched. *§Your life is worth ten of his, let him figure out what to do with the cup.§*

§Is that why you bit me?§ Harry asked incredulously. *§Bloody hell!§*

Harry reached out and grasped Serion behind his head and squeezed. The tiny green garden snake bucked and writhed, hissed and spitted obscenities at Harry. With his bitten hand, Harry took the cup and swiftly drank down the meager contents of his blood from it. The copper taste stuck to the back of his throat, making him gag slightly, but Harry didn't stop drinking until the only thing left in the cup was a reddish stain.

Harry felt a tug. It was an extremely odd and discomforting sensation but nothing like having to regrow all the bones in one's arm and hand. A sharper tug hit him and panic rippled through Harry as his magic

and life force swelled up to his skin and drained away. The Horcrux was siphoning off his energy to feed itself. Harry struggled, violently pulling the cup away from his face. Blackish goo trailed from his lips to the rim of the cup. It--Voldemort yanked harder on Harry's core, staggering the Ravenclaw as the cup bucked wildly toward his face.

Serion was yelling at him but Harry couldn't make out the words over the buzzing in his ears. He tossed the cup across the room and wobbled unsteadily as a wave of vertigo hit him. Without the presence of the Horcrux holding him up, Harry fell to the ground, barely managing to avoid cracking his skull against the stones. Pain reverberated up his forearms at the sudden impact.

Harry tried to cut off the flow of magic and but he couldn't. Even with the cup away from him, he was being sapped of life, magic, and energy. He couldn't hold onto it long enough to do something about it. A simple incantation would be too much for him. Groaning miserably, Harry struggled to stay awake, to stem the flow, to fight off the Horcrux, anything.

Managing to raise his head, he watched in horror as the amorphous goo bubbled sickeningly. Faces appeared and disappeared in screaming terror. Their otherworldly appearance reminded Harry of the restricted book in the library.

Serion was by Harry's side in a second, hissing and spitting at the black sludge as it oozed ominously. They watched in terror as the shapeless mass rose upward, forming what they both knew would be some form of Voldemort as the soul took on its shape and essence.

§Harry block the flow to him!§ Serion shouted, unsettled as the faces grew in size, their masks of horror grotesque and vivid. *§Do it now!§*

§I'm trying!§ Harry hissed fiercely, unable to raise his voice.

Serion shifted in front of Harry, offering what little protection he could as the mass took form and a hand popped out. It was as black as the skuzzy substance it came from. A leg followed by another hand shot out of the sludge. In minutes, an entire body took shape and the amount of energy drawn from Harry made his vision wobble and blacken on the edges.

Harry shivered; his scar stabbing unmercifully as the presence solidified and the aqueous cover slide off like a wizard's coat revealing a forty-something man with snake nostrils instead of a nose and blood red eyes. He ignored Harry, instead taking stock of his body, looking it over as if he were admiring his fine handy work. Serion's rapid hissing brought the man's attention toward to the duo on the floor.

§Ah, what is this, my fellow snake?§ Voldemort said, listening to the garden snake's string of curses. *§Such language coming from the likes of you. Mind your manners or I will kill your pet human.§*

§You're killing him now!§ Serion hissed, raising his head and baring fangs.

"Don't aggravate my snake," Harry muttered, fighting for balance as he rose to his knees and.

"You must be very strong to still be awake for this part of the process," Voldemort told him, stepping away from the cup. "Do you know who I am?"

Slowly and carefully, he shifted back onto his haunches, stabilizing himself with a hand on the stone floor. "Yeah," Harry managed to croak. "I know who you are, you murdering sack of shit."

"Then there's no need for me to introduce myself. However, that leaves me without your name," Voldemort said, towering over Harry.

From so close, Harry could see that the body was still largely incorporeal. Harry felt exhausted and was close to passing out. "Why do you care?"

"I should like to know it so you can be a footnote in the book written about me after I conquer Great Britain. You'll be famous for giving up your life so that I shall live."

Harry pressed a hand to his stabbing scar and used the nearest desk as leverage to hoist himself up. Closing his eyes against the whirl of the room, he took several deep breaths and tried to find his center. Maybe meditation would help him where sheer will had not.

"You can't stop the flow. I will drain you of every last drop that you have to offer."

"You can try," Harry said, removing his hand and grimacing. "But you will not succeed."

Voldemort circled around Harry, sizing him up and determining his worth. "You are a source of ceaseless amazement," he told the boy, smiling in satisfaction. "Here you are standing and talking when anyone else would be passed out like a good little donor. To think of the power you have, that I shall have and augment with my own natural gifts."

"Sodding ponce," Harry retorted, watching the shade closely. "You are a snooty bastard, aren't you. What makes you think you will succeed at your goals for power?"

Voldemort considered him for a moment, absently touching the top of one of the desks. "Very well. You have earned that right, I should think." He stopped there for a moment, collecting his thoughts. "I have done things, terrible things, to ensure my goals of power and immortality. Some... some would call me evil, but they do not have vision. The wizarding world is stagnant and ready for change. I will change it, shake it out of its Victorian ideals and bring it forth into a new regime."

Harry watched Serion slither toward the cup and abruptly refocused his attention on Voldemort, who was now looking out the classroom's only window. "Making a Horcrux is evil," Harry retorted, staggering against the desk as another tug jerked his body toward the cup.

Voldemort whirled around, his red eyes wide and stalked back to him. "What do you know about Horcruxes?" he demanded, leaning over Harry.

"That you have seven."

Voldemort's face darkened at Harry's words. Inside, Harry thought, 'Gotcha.' His eyes flickered over to Serion and saw the tiny green snake scoop up the cup and slither out of view. He didn't know what the garden snake planned to do, but he hoped it was successful.

"Nobody can make seven Horcruxes," Voldemort scoffed, his composure once more under his control.

Harry nodded, winced, and said, "Nobody except you. I've already found two of them. The real question is how you keep making them."

Voldemort domineer switched abruptly once more as he sneered menacingly at Harry. "You won't find them all, birdbrain."

Harry spluttered a laugh. "Is that the most insulting thing you could think of or did you run out of witty things to say?"

"It's a pity you're going to die from this process, I would have enjoyed killing you slowly for your impudence."

"Damn, and I would have so loved to have been at that little party too," Harry retorted, before doubling over and heaving onto the floor. Revolted, Voldemort took a step back. "That's nasty. Reminds me of the crap that you just emerged from," he said once he stopped gagging.

"The Ensouled Elixir does not look like your vomit," Voldemort replied loftily.

"Ensouled Elixir?"

"Ingenious isn't it?" Voldemort praised. "It was created by Salazar Slytherin himself. The faces of the victims used in the creation process appear throughout the potion when it activates."

"Why use that now when you haven't used it before?"

"You know that I am the Heir of Slytherin?" Voldemort queried. Harry nodded. "I've also claimed the heritage of Hufflepuff as my own."

Confused, Harry asked, "How in the name of Merlin did you do that?"

"By killing every surviving Hufflepuff Heir. I tracked the passage of Helga's noble blood through every noble and bastardized line; killing every pureblood, half-blood, mudblood, and squib I came across. Their faces are the ones you see in the Elixir."

"But you still can't claim to be Hufflepuff's heir!" Harry said appalled. "You have no right to it."

"No right? It rightfully belongs to me as the sole Slytherin Heir. Helga's piece of the school is mine now. Soon I will control these halls and they shall be my headquarters."

"Over Dumbledore's dead body."

"How right you are," Voldemort said evilly, face lighting up with wicked mirth. "As he and his brother are Ravenclaw's Heirs. I will kill them and scoop up the prize."

"Trophies," Harry whispered, recognition dawning as he finally understood what Dumbledore's note meant.

"Yes, I suppose you could call my Horcruxes that," Voldemort answered, waving a hand dismissively. "Not much time left for you I'm afraid. Let me thank you again for your--NO!"

§He's my human!§ Serion yelled, hissing and spitting rapidly.

§That's a precious artifact, you stupid flobberworm!§ Voldemort raced over to the tiny snake trying to swipe at him as he gnawed on the metal.

Coughing up blood, Harry dragged his wand out and gave an experimental flick. Nothing happened, not even a spark. Trying again, Harry repeated the motion several times determined to get a result.

He heard the pair hissing and cursing at each other as Voldemort grew more and more harried. Serion kept mangling the metal with his fangs until he nicked himself. That's when things really got interesting.

Harry stumbled, falling flat on his face; the last vestiges of his magical reserves flooding his senses. Tingling power raced up and down his arms, slipping and gliding back into its natural home. Heady with the sudden influx, Harry lost his sight and hearing for a few precious seconds.

Looking up, Harry saw Serion flailing around screaming in agony as Voldemort flickered, cursing wildly and creatively until his image steadied out. Harry saw the difference immediately in Voldemort as his skin grew fleshier and less transparent. Before the Dark Lord could so much as raise a finger to his snake Harry fired off the killing curse.

"I am not alive you thick-witted 'Claw," Voldemort sneered, immediately turning toward him. "The next time you run off half-cocked remember that the killing curse requires so much more than desperation to cast it properly."

"You're right, that was particularly dim-witted," Harry growled, casting both Weatherby's and Hermione's curses at the cup in quick succession. "Annullo Pravus! Avedo Kaodavrea!"

The first spell hit the cup cracking the metal in two. Blackness oozed out accompanied by a putrid smell. When Hermione's slammed home it caused Voldemort to scream.

The sludge grumbled ominously before racing over and up Voldemort's body. The Dark Lord's frantic movements did not stop the flood from climbing up his body. Soon it was covering his chest and gliding up his neck, covering his chin and mouth.

The Horcrux tried to draw from Harry again. He was able to hold it off by drawing his magic inside himself with an equally unrelenting force. Fresh perspiration broke out over his brow, but he refused to let his magic go without a fight this time.

The fight between Horcrux and spell did not abate until in one burst of light followed by an agonizing scream of pain Voldemort melted into mush. At the collapse of the Horcrux, Harry's magic swelled into the room.

It was more than he'd ever accessed. Like when the flow to Voldemort had been cut off by Serion's actions, the magic came thundering home with a chugging noise similar to the Hogwarts Express. He fought to rise above the tide, but it crashed into him tugging him under. Harry sunk like a rock in water, slipping away into unconsciousness.

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He heard whispers. Opening his eyes, Harry found himself lying down on an opulent silver and green bed. The murmurs grew louder and he slipped out to investigate them.

He ended up in a narrow corridor; Harry looked first one way then the other trying to determine his surroundings. Nothing was familiar to him, but the voices were coming from the left. Deciding something was better than nothing, Harry headed in that direction, keeping himself steady by tracing a hand along the wall.

"We're heading out tonight," a low baritone voice said inside a room. "The Dark Lord wants to make it known that nobody is safe, not even them."

"What time, Lucius?" another voice asked.

Harry crept to the doorway and peered around the doorjamb. Inside the small cramped debriefing room were four figures. Only Lucius had his bone mask off, casually discarded onto a cluttered table.

"We attack in two hours, friends," he replied, flicking his wand to a map. "Take note of the coordinates. We will be Apparating there. Expect heavy warding. Dumbledore is sure to have whipped up something special."

Harry craned his neck, trying to see the map, but it was obscured. Rubbing his scar absently, he frowned in thought. There was going to be an attack tonight. He had to tell somebody. Unfortunately, he thought disgustedly, that somebody was likely to be Dumbledore. If only the old codger would listen to him.

His thoughts were broken by a dryly said, "Bloody terrific," from a rich female voice in the back. "The Great Dummy did the wards and the Dark Lord expects us to get past them?"

Lucius tossed her a glower. "You will do your best. Seeking the wrath of the Dark Lord is ill advised. He expects the two of you to be able to crack whatever Dumbledore could throw at you. You are after all some of Gringotts finest curse breakers.

"Now, if we could get back to the matter at hand. Watson, you are going to tackle the Missus while I go after the cuckold husband. From observations by the scouts, she will be in the kitchen or in the bedroom. The kitchen is on the first floor. Go there immediately before proceeding to search for her elsewhere."

"Yes, sir," said the man, Watson, Harry assumed, next to the woman in the back.

Lucius nodded, a curtain of silver hair covering his face for a moment before he flicked it away. "Right. Onto spells. You can of course use the Unforgiveables and other assorted illegal spells. Wield them well. Or if you find yourself more comfortable with weaker curses," here he sneered, "Then there are the standard bludgeoning, cutting, flame, and other slicing and dicing jinxes and hexes."

Suddenly, Harry felt himself getting tugged backwards towards something solid and slumbering. The last he heard before faded away was Lucius' bark of orders to eat and return within the hour.

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"You should really be going Mr. Potter. I know you worry about your brother, but at times like these, you must leave him to his rest."

Harry dimly heard Daniel's answered murmur full of saccharine sweetness, "I just want to know if he's all right, Madam Pomfrey."

"Daniel," Harry heard Dumbledore say from close by. "Come with me to my office. You must tell me what happened."

"Well sir, I found him next to that snake and cup and did what I had to do to save him," Daniel said, his voice and footsteps trailing after the Headmaster's.

"He's lying," said a very welcomed voice.

"Hush now Miss Granger," Madam Pomfrey rebuked. "You need your rest as much as Mr. Potter does."

"Well he is," Hermione replied sourly as the Healer fluffed her pillows.

"Why would Mr. Potter lie about rescuing his brother, Miss Granger? He's done it before, and I daresay he'll continue to do it."

"He was lying then too."

Harry blinked open his eyes to stare at the blurred ceiling of the infirmary as Madam Pomfrey clucked in disappointment. He felt around for his magic and almost passed out again from the rolling swells of it pounding underneath his skin for release.

More was readily accessible to him in terms of raw power, he could tell by the feel of it. He was going to have to learn how to control it soon or he'd be distracted by the headiness of it.

With a groan, Harry sat up, reaching for his glasses. He slipped them on over his nose, happy to have the world slide into focus. He quickly glanced over to Hermione and smiled at her toothy grin.

"You're awake," she said happily.

Harry ruffled his hair, smothering a yawn. "You are too. I was really worried."

"You're telling me," Hermione replied. "I saw Daniel bring you into the infirmary. Nobody would tell me what was going on either."

"I had hoped that part wasn't true," Harry grumbled. "What happened to the snake?"

She sighed and shook her head. "I don't know. Daniel only came up with you under the sway of a *mobilicorpus*. You used Weatherby's spell didn't you?"

He nodded. "Yes, and yours too. They worked like a charm."

"Is the cup--"

"Yes. Destroyed, much like the soul."

"Who's?" Hermione asked.

"Voldemort's."

Her face paled drastically. He didn't say anymore as Madam Pomfrey came out to check on the noise and then busied herself fixing him up. Hermione stayed silent, watching him as closely as the school Healer was as she shoved another potion at him to drink up. Harry cursed his loose tongue.

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 18°«««°»»»°

Chapter 19

Hermione was released from observation just before the end of morning classes the next day. What frustrated Harry was that he couldn't follow her. Madam Pomfrey refused to give him a clean bill of health. Dumbledore had shown up early in the morning to speak with Pomfrey and Hermione. Harry pretended to be asleep in an attempt to hear what was being said, but in both instances privacy charms had been used.

Harry rolled over and sighed. He wanted to speak with Serion. He hadn't seen the snake since he'd passed out and was worried about him. He was certain the garden snake was going to need some tender loving care if he was as sore as Harry felt.

Pomfrey bustled about tending to the students that filtered in and out. One little girl requested a stomach soothing potion and several fifth years came in needing sleep potions each having acute cases of insomnia by way of excessive worrying and studying. Harry noted that the seventh years did not suffer from the same anxiety even though it was their N.E.W.T. year, because other than an ear check requested by a seventh year Hufflepuff, no other seventh years set foot inside the infirmary. Maybe they had discovered the way to balance their busy schedules that as fifth years hadn't known, or maybe it was because they could brew their own potions.

Harry tried to plot his escape but it was apparent that somebody had informed the warden. Just after lunch he'd been given a sleeping draft and had napped the day away. He woke up disoriented in the late afternoon as the last classes for the day were being dismissed.

"Ah," came a gentle rasping voice as Harry opened his eyes and blinked up at the ceiling. "I was beginning to wonder if Poppy had given you a stronger dose. How are you feeling Mr. Potter?"

Harry groaned and reached for his glasses. "Spectacular, Headmaster."

Dumbledore nodded solemnly, clasping his hands over his long white beard. "As to be expected. Your brother told me what happened and I must admit, I am curious as to how you came across that artifact?"

Harry cleared his throat. "Err--" he mumbled, stalling. "I found it, sir."

"Really? Where did you find such a valuable artifact?" inquired Dumbledore.

He scratched his head looking briefly into the Headmaster's eyes. "I don't really remember. All I can tell you is that I got lost in Diagon Alley. Next thing I know I tripped over a small package. I picked it up and ran back to the AMAS point. I didn't want to be late for dinner."

The Headmaster stared at him and Harry felt like his words were being weighed. "Can you tell me anything about the place where you found such a priceless piece of history? I find it most curious that someone would simply leave it behind."

Harry scratched his nose, then at a piece of lint on the hospital bed. "I don't really remember, sir."

"Do you know what it was that you were dealing with down in the classroom, Mr. Potter?"

"I don't understand, Professor," Harry said, casting about wildly for a way to get out of the conversation.

Dumbledore frowned, his eyes narrowing behind his spectacles. "I see, well then, you should know that you were dealing with a very dark artifact. You should be expelled for having it."

"I'm expelled?" Harry asked alarmed.

"No, you won't be. But I'm curious about how you always seem to end up getting hurt by things you shouldn't even know about. Your actions keep putting your brother in great danger."

Harry narrowed his eyes, matching the Headmaster's heavy gaze. "I don't put him in danger. It's his own foolishness that puts him in danger. Besides what danger would an artifact from a founder be? Why is it that you called it dark? I thought it was a chalice that once belonged to Helga Hufflepuff. I did the research on it."

“Nevertheless, your brother has saved you from your own foolishness,” Dumbledore replied sternly. “You should not mock his actions.”

“Whatever,” Harry muttered darkly.

At that moment Draco walked through the infirmary doors with blood pouring down the front of him. Hermione came through next hovering anxiously beside the injured Slytherin. Harry could not have been happier to see them.

“Madam Pomfrey!” Hermione yelled, “Draco’s injured!”

Alarmed, Dumbledore turned his gaze from the profusely bleeding boy to the Headgirl. “Miss Granger what happened to young Mr. Malfoy?”

“Thee jinth mae!” Draco yelled angrily, the skin peeping through his hands flushed a deep red-purple that clashed horribly with his silver hair.

“We were dueling in Defense,” Hermione explained, twisting her hands together.

“Ith wath en illeegal moffh!”

Hermione stopped wringing her hands and glared at Draco. “It was not! Professor Hobbday clearly defined the rules before the start of the match. Just because you don’t know how to block a simple Capillary Burst jinx is not my fault.”

“Way to go, Hermione!” Harry inserted with a huge grin.

“Profethther,” Draco said, trying to appeal to Dumbledore.

“Mr. Malfoy, what on earth happened?” Madam Pomfrey demanded, bustling over from her office.

“Thee jinth mae!” Draco answered immediately, one hand pointing to Hermione before coming back to his face to try to stem his nosebleed.

“Lower your hands deary,” she replied, tutting softly under her breath as she took in the damage to the Slytherin’s face which was deeply bruised in several areas, swollen in others, and bleeding from both nose and mouth. “What was he hit with Miss Granger?”

“Capillary Burst jinx, Madam.”

“Just the face or a full body?” Pomfrey questioned sharply, running her wand over Draco.

Hermione hastened to explain to the school Healer. “The shortened incantation Madam, Professor Hobday said casting anything that could cause...”

“You look like an angry Weasley minus the red hair, Dray,” Harry said with glee over his girlfriend.

“Thutt itt!” Draco yelled, turning his face toward Harry on the bed.

Dumbledore frowned, looking down at Harry. “Don’t antagonize--”

“Hold still, Mr. Malfoy!” Pomfrey commanded, waving her wand erratically.

“Sure Dray, whatever you want,” he acquiesced, sitting back against the pillows and enjoying the show.

“Miss Granger, please go fetch a blood replenishing potion and a bruise ointment from the cabinets.”

“Right away, Madam Pomfrey,” Hermione said before hurrying off to get it.

“Now, Mr. Malfoy, this is going to feel a little funny,” Pomfrey warned, raising her wand. “*Renovo Capelaires*.”

“Ahh!!” Draco yelped, jumping back from the portly Healer, hands going to his face once more.

Harry watched Hermione rush back to them, wheezing as she handed over the tiny black bottles. Madam Pomfrey plucked it from

her fingertips and approached the moaning Slytherin. Draco noticed her movements and took a hurried step back.

Pomfrey stopped and glared. "Now stop that foolishness at once, Mr. Malfoy. You need the blood or you're going to faint dead away."

Draco glared spitefully as the Healer forced his hands away and pried his mouth open with a firm order to drink up. Harry slipped in another wise-crack riling the Slytherin up quite nicely. Hermione looked torn between laughing and scowling and ended up looking ill herself.

"There. Done." Madame Pomfrey reached over and took the second bottle from Hermione. "Apply this once a day for the next three days. You're free to go."

Gingerly Draco touched his face and a flash of relief showed through before a mean and cool mask slipped over the aristocratic features. "Thank you," he said, straightening and dropping his hands.

"I don't know Madam Pomfrey," Harry said from his bed, squinting. "I think Dray looked better before you fixed him up. The red did wonders for his vampiric complexion."

"Eat slugs," came the Slytherin's acidic reply.

"Nah, I had breakfast already, Dray, thanks for thinking about me though."

After an indeterminable but apparently suitably cutting remark, Draco turned on his heel and stalked out of the infirmary. Poppy and Albus watched the youth's retreating back before leveling unsuccessfully cowing glares at Harry. He smirked in response and ignored them both cheerfully. Dumbledore moved to say something but Harry talked over him.

"Did you bring me today's classwork and homework, Hermione?"

She nodded, shooting the Headmaster a timid glance before retrieving a set of her duplicated notes and handing them to Harry. He accepted them gratefully and started perusing them. Exasperated with Harry's teenage antics, Dumbledore told him he would talk to

him later and swept out of the ward. Harry just smirked knowingly at Hermione.

"That wasn't very smart, Harry. He's our Headmaster, you should respect him to his face even if you don't behind his back."

"I will when he will," he replied blithely. "I refuse to be treated like a wrong doer or like a child. I am neither and he should accept that and talk with me accordingly."

Her lips pursed together in disapproval. "Then next time act like an adult and stop playing childish games with him."

Harry frowned at her, before grudgingly dropping his angry defense. "You're right. He just rubs me wrong these days. I hate all the play-acting he's pulling while trying to read my mind."

"I found a book on Occlumency, you know, the mind protecting magic we ran across earlier, during break today," Hermione admitted, reaching into her bag again and pulling out a thick tome. Harry reached for it eagerly, but she quickly pulled it back. "First tell me Harry, why do you call Draco, Dray? I mean I see it gets to him, but it's kind of odd."

"Oh that?" he said, grinning wickedly and plucking the book from her fingers. "Let's just say I overheard Pansy calling him that when they were snogging their brains out in a broom cupboard."

"Okay, how is that funny?"

"She asked him why he was so small. He got angry, burst out from the cupboard they were in and ran straight into me."

Hermione blinked rapidly digesting the information before collapsing beside him on the bed and laughing riotously. Harry grinned too and scooted over patting the freed up space beside him.

"Come sit with me."

Hermione glanced briefly over her shoulder and sat primly on the edge. Harry's grin broadened as he grabbed her hand and tugged her backwards against him. She landed with a heavy 'oof.'

"There that's better," he said cheekily, wrapping his arm around her shoulder.

"Harry, we're in the infirmary!"

"So?" he asked, pressing a kiss to her cheek. "It's not like we're doing something a bit more fun." At Hermione's flabbergasted look, Harry chuckled and opened up the Occlumency book to the first chapter. "Come on now, luv, stop your pouting; remember I'm a sick boy and all. Just read to me."

She shifted, gathering her bushy hair into a single point in the back of her head. Harry handed her the Brenda's Everlasting Non-Misplacing Hair Tie that had suddenly appeared on her lap. "Thanks," she said and took the hair tie, wrapping her gathered hair up into a pony-tail.

"The beginner's guide to Occlumency starts here with the commonly practiced step of clearing one's mind. It is ultimately the easiest and the hardest obstacle in the process of fortifying the mind from magical penetration.

"To do this one must clear the mind of all extraneous thoughts. What you had for lunch, where your Gringotts key went off to, will he or she notice me; these trivialities must be erased. They are not conducive to your mental growth.

"Start practicing now, preferably in the comfort of silence. Noise and other distractions will vie for your attention. To even consider them as nuisances will disrupt the environment you are trying to create for yourself. Relax and think, if you must, of a bay window in a bright, sunlit room. You are sitting on it, bathed in the warmth of the sun, insects drone on outside and an old book is resting on your lap.

"If you have done this properly you will begin to notice the buzzing rise in your ears or the deafening silence swell and compress in a discomfiting sensation. You must not waver now because your tolerance is being tested.

“Ride the overwhelming feeling and you will find yourself falling. It will seem like a long time has passed without change in your tumbling status. Before long you will hit a fleshy floor. This is your brain.

“It is highly suggested to practice frequently and often to get to this point as fast as possible. Also time yourself on how long you can be maintain it. The longer you can stay on that fleshy floor, the better you will be at laying the new foundations for your mental constitution.”

Harry stayed her hand from turning the page as Daniel walked into the infirmary.

“What story did you spin this time, brother?” Harry asked before adding scornfully, “Was it some dashing heroic tale of a lone Gryffindor riding to the rescue of his glory-seeking but ultimately reckless Ravenclaw brother? Did you tell him how all along you knew I would have been better in Slytherin?”

Daniel raked his hands through his hair and tossed Hermione a playful wink. “Now, Harry, don’t get your knickers all in a twist. If I hadn’t come by at just the right time, you would have died. It was easy to save you; I didn’t even break a sweat. Training under Dumbledore’s wand and wisdom does have its advantages.”

Hermione’s look soured as she shut the book. “I’m curious too. What spells did you use that Professor Dumbledore taught you?”

“All sorts, but the most powerful, Hermione,” Daniel said saucily, sitting down at the end of Harry’s rest bed, “was the give-back-thrice karma hex.”

“And Dumbledore actually bought that?” Harry interjected, before Hermione could open her mouth.

Daniel met his brother’s gaze. “Why wouldn’t he?”

“No reason,” Harry replied. “He just grilled me not to long ago.”

Daniel smirked. “That’s because I let him know that you--”

“Morgona’s breath,” Hermione exploded, her face turning a livid shade of red. “Do you actually believe the tall tales that come out of your mouth? I know Harry was the one who took care of the Hufflepuff cup and fought Voldemort--”

“Don’t say his name!” Daniel retorted. “Have you no--”

Hermione poked him in the chest. “You’re even afraid of his name!”

Daniel’s face purpled. “You have no right to speak with me that way. I’m the Boy-Who-Lived.”

“That’s right, Daniel,” Harry replied dryly. “You are. Now what did you do to my snake?”

Daniel’s face paled as all the blood drained from his face. “You like snakes? I knew you should have been in Slytherin, you Death Eater cur. No wonder you knew about the attack on the train. Did you know about the attack on Surrey’s coastline too?”

“What gives you the right to say that to me?” Harry growled, taking Hermione’s hand as they both remembered the worry she’d been in over her parents supposed death. “Now where’s Serion?”

“You named it?”

“He came with a name, you wanker.”

“I told Dumbledore I killed it because it was You-Know-Who’s servant.”

Harry paled, his grip on Hermione’s hand tightening excruciatingly. “You killed him?”

“Snakes are evil.”

“You’re evil,” Hermione remarked angrily, squeezing Harry’s hand back.

Daniel drew himself up from the bed. “If you dare say that in public I’ll sue you in Wizengamot faster than you can say ‘Chosen One.’”

Hermione glared at her boyfriend's twin. "I think you better leave."

"I won't hold it against you, Hermione, when Harry turns out to be exactly what everybody thinks of him."

The minute Daniel had stalked out of the door, Hermione pulled Harry in a fierce hug. "I'm so sorry. I didn't meet Serion, but he must have been a good pet like Hedwig."

"Thank you," Harry said thickly, releasing her.

She dabbed at her own eyes. "Did you think I would turn Serion in because snakes are not allowed as pets at Hogwarts? Is that why I never met him?"

Harry shook his head, staring mutely at the white linens of the infirmary bed. "I was sure you'd disapprove."

Hermione hugged him again, pulling him closer until his forehead rested in the curve of her neck. "Crookshanks is mean and territorial with you and you keep making the effort to win him over. How could you think I would mind your scaly pet?"

Harry took a deep shuddering breath and pulled back. "I'm sorry, I did you a great disservice."

"Don't apologize, Harry."

"I need to get out of here."

"What can I do?" Hermione asked, scooting closer and rubbing his back.

"Distract Pomfrey."

"I can do that."

She stood up trailing her fingers over his arm, giving his fingers a light squeeze before slipping away. Harry watched her disappear around the bend into Madam Pomfrey's office. A surprised murmur came from within and Harry dragged his startled ass out of bed.

“Way to go Hermione!” Harry said for the second time that day and shuffled towards his folded robes.

Slipping out of the thin robe set he was in and back into his hand-me-downs. They were shorter than he remembered, both in leg and arm length. Harry piled up the bed linens with a flick of his wrist and hobbled out of the door.

The exertion was costing him more than he expected it would. The excess magic filling him buzzed in his ear and rang in his skull. The pain in his chest expanded as he grabbed at the door ledge. Suddenly the aches and bruises were overridden by a new agony. Head splitting glee ran through him and Harry blanched, wavering unsteadily on two feet.

Madam Pomfrey, acting on some sixth sense, bustled out of her office trailed by a nervously babbling Hermione.

“Mr. Potter just what are you doing out of bed?”

“Leaving,” Harry replied, casting Hermione a wan smile.

“Oh no you’re not, not until I give you one last final check.”

Harry closed his eyes. “Make it fast.”

“I won’t have you making demands on me, young Mr. Potter,” Pomfrey declared, briskly waving her wand over him.

His scar flared and she hesitated in her movements. Harry smiled weakly, trying hard not to wince. One sign of pain and he was a goner.

“Mr. Potter are you feeling alright?” she asked, leveling a stern glare at him.

“I’m fine,” he croaked, coughing to clear his throat. At her disbelieving look he added, “Honestly. Fit as a broomstick.”

“Broomsticks are inanimate,” Pomfrey pointed out, not buying his assessment. Hermione’s clear harrumph from behind the Healer told him quite clearly that she didn’t either.

“Can I go?” he whined. “Please?”

The motherly matron deliberated, raking her keen eyes over his eager form. “Oh all right, but don’t be going and straining yourself, Mr. Potter. You don’t want a relapse.”

Harry threw himself out the door before the last word was said. Hermione called after him, hurrying to catch up with his lurching half-run. He didn’t stop for her, determined to get the news to the Headmaster if it killed him. As if answering his unspoken promise stabbing pain ripped through his mind.

“Damn Voldemort. Damn Lucius.”

“Harry where are you going!”

Instead of answering he ran down the corridors towards Dumbledore’s office. His mind raced trying to come up with a way to get the Great Dummy to believe him. As he ran, he tried to remember the other names mentioned in his dream-vision but could only recall Lucius and that there were two Gringott’s curse breakers with him. The latter would be better told to the Goblins. Not Raypirnk, that goblin was a bloody wanker.

Coming to a halt in front of the gargoyle, Harry was immediately assaulted by another searing pain. “Fuck!” he said with feeling as his head swam, bright colors dancing nauseatingly across his vision. “I need to speak with Dumbledore,” he said commandingly.

“Harry,” Hermione panted, rounding the end of the hall.

Harry glared at the hunk of stone sat there mockingly before he kicked it sharply. “I demand that you move.”

Hermione limp-walked up the corridor holding a stitch in her side. “What on earth is so urgent Harry?”

§Move!§ he hissed angrily under his breath, casting a glance over his shoulder at his approaching girlfriend.

The eyes of the gargoyle widened before sketching a bow and jumping out of the way. Harry smirked in approval. "That's right you miserable troll."

"I've never seen it do that before," Hermione said in awe as she reached him.

"Come on," Harry said, grabbing her hand and tugging her up the moving staircase.

At the top, Harry switched hands with Hermione and knocked loudly on the heavy ornate wooden door, bursting into the office without waiting for an invitation.

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 19°«««°»»»°

Chapter 20

Dumbledore looked up over his spectacles at the two Ravenclaws standing before him. "Yes, please do come in and sit down." He sat back and raised an eyebrow. "I take it you want to talk with me now, Mr. Potter?"

"Professor," Harry started, looking at the Headmaster's nose. "There's an attack happening right now. You must alert the Order immediately!"

A polite look settled over the Headmaster's features. "I see. And how would you come to know about such an attack?"

"That isn't important. What is important is the couple that is being assassinated as we speak."

Dumbledore peered at Harry skeptically. "Nothing of this has reached me by my other means. How do I know you're not lying, Mr. Potter, when you are clearly avoiding eye contact?"

"I'm not lying," Harry stated firmly, jutting out his jaw, before remembering Hermione's words and stopping the childish gesture immediately. "Voldemort is attacking a couple tonight, to teach them that not even you can keep them safe from him."

Hermione gapped at him, her pale face unable to keep up with her cycling emotions. "Harry, how do you know this?" she asked before Dumbledore voiced his paralleling thoughts.

Harry shook his head. "It doesn't matter. This is important, you must send the Order to help them."

Dumbledore clasped his hands in front of him on the desk and leaned forward. "You do realize you can trust me with anything, Harry. Anything at all. It is not too late to come forward."

Crossed between fuming and rolling his eyes, Harry retorted, "I'm not a Death Eater. My brother is the bloody Boy-Who-Lived, why on earth would I join the man who tried to kill him?"

“Ah, Harry, my poor boy,” Dumbledore stated sadly. “Therein lies the rub. What did Voldemort offer you? Did he offer you power? Glory? Fame? Enough of it to make you outshine your twin?”

“NO! I haven’t joined the sodding bastard!”

“Harry’s not a Death Eater!” Hermione exclaimed, blushing furiously.

“How can you be so sure, Miss Granger?” Dumbledore asked, his sharp blue eyes losing their twinkle as they fell on her.

“I--I--that is we--Harry and I--” she stammered, looking at Harry helplessly.

He took her hand. “Hermione’s trying to tell you we’ve been gallivanting around Hogwarts trying to join Hogwarts’ BC100 club.”

Hermione turned beat red, but nodding affirmatively.

“The BC100 club? Is it new?” Dumbledore asked, appearing intrigued. “Which professor supports it?”

“BC100 means Broom Closets. One hundred of them.”

“Hogwarts has a hundred broom cupboards?”

“According to Filch we have one-hundred-and-two,” Hermione replied, fidgeting. “But nobody can locate the last two.”

“What does this club have to do with Miss Granger’s staunch declaration on your behalf?”

Harry wrapped an arm around Hermione’s waist and said calmly, “Sir, it means she’s seen me in various states of undress.”

“The dark mark is branded on his supporters’ arms,” Hermione supplied, gratified for the support. “I read about it in the *Prophet* series on the trials.”

“I see,” Dumbledore said frowning in the Headgirl’s direction. “Well I suppose her vouching for you will do for now, Mr. Potter, but I still must insist on how you found out about this attack. Can you tell me

anything more than that it involves a couple? Can you tell me their names? Whether they are young or old? Where they live? I simply can not accept your information as truth and send my Order into uncertain and dangerous conditions on merely a child's whim."

Harry purpled, biting back his first response. "No. I can't tell you those things. What I can tell you is that Lucius Malfoy is planning the attack."

At this little revelation, the Headmaster sat upright. "Mr. Malfoy you say? Did Draco Malfoy say this to you?"

"No."

"Did you overhear the young Mr. Malfoy boasting in the halls to his friends then?"

"No."

Dumbledore let out an annoyed huff, which puff up his beard a little. "Is there anything else you can add?"

Harry gripped Hermione's waist suddenly remembering some of the details that had eluded him on his journey up to the Headmaster's office. "Yeah, there are four Death Eaters involved and they're attacking somewhere you personally warded."

"Interesting," the Headmaster said after a long period of contemplative silence. "Well thank you Mr. Potter, Miss Granger, it has been enlightening."

"Aren't you going to do anything?" Harry asked incredulously.

"You needn't concern yourselves," Dumbledore stated firmly, beckoning them to leave.

As the pair turned to leave, a buzzing noise rose up from behind the Headmaster. Fawkes woke up from his perch by the door and squawked urgently. Dumbledore snapped into action, standing up and hurriedly consulting with the busily whirling object that was insisting quite loudly that something was amiss.

Harry watched Dumbledore nod distractedly to the chirruping phoenix, and concluded that the Headmaster understood what the bird was saying. A connection like that had to be deeper than simply the mind to mind imagery he had expected; perhaps it was a familiar-master bond.

Dumbledore swept his beard over his shoulder and prodded his desk with his long and slender wand. A map of Britain shimmered into existence. Another tap showered the table in glittery dots of five different colors. One in particular turned black, emitting a faint hiss of smoke.

“Professor?” Hermione asked timidly, clutching Harry’s waist in apprehension.

“*Revelios.*”

The map zoomed in quickly and four dots twinkled where one had been. Harry gulped as the region came into focus. He knew the area well, and now knew what the dots meant. The dots had to indicate the four families that lived in Ottery St. Catchpole: the Lovegoods, the Patils, the Weasleys, and the Potters.

The Lovegoods could be ruled out because Harry knew Mr. Lovegood was a widower and still single after six years. The Patils had twin daughters and two younger boys who were not yet out of preliminary schooling. Harry was fairly certain Lucius would have mentioned kids to torture. That left the Weasleys, whose children were all attending Hogwarts or had graduated leaving the older couple alone at home and vulnerable to Voldemort’s attacks against the strong Light families.

Just like the Potters.

Harry held his breath, watching Dumbledore fiddle and poke with different things around the map. It became three dimensional and four black figurines popped into view right outside the Potter’s property.

“Shit,” Harry said with feeling as Dumbledore’s blue eyes blazed right through him.

"You are to stay here, Harry and not to leave until I get back. Miss Granger, you will need to stay as well. Fawkes."

The scarlet bird flew off the perch and landed on Dumbledore's shoulder, his sharp talons gripping harshly through the subdued robes. In a flash of fire both the bird and Headmaster had left. Harry spun around to leave as well and saw that when he'd been paying attention to the interactions between Dumbledore and his familiar the doors and windows had been shut and locked.

"*Alohomora*," he said, flicking his hand at the door, the magic coiled around him flying away easily.

"It won't work," she said, slipping away from him and settling down on an overstuffed chair as the spell hit the solid doors and evaporated. So distracted was she, that Hermione didn't notice that he hadn't used a wand to perform the spell.

Harry frowned, went over to the door and shook it. "Why lock us in?"

Hermione shook her head, her dazed eyes clearing. "He doesn't trust us. How did you know of the attack before it happened Harry? Not even Dumbledore knew!"

Harry grumbled, giving the door a good kick before crossing over and sitting down on the other proffered visitor chair. "It doesn't matter how I got it!"

"Apparently it does. Dumbledore thought you were a Death Eater."

Harry looked at her, his body tensing awaiting the blow her words could deliver. "I'm not one though, you know that."

Hermione glared at him. "Of course I know that, we've nearly seen each other completely naked."

"I'm willing to see you completely naked," Harry said with a casual smirk.

She conjured a pillow and threw it at him. Harry caught it much to her displeasure. "You and your snitch catching skills."

"I have other skills I'd be delighted to show you," Harry replied, quickly using the pillow to block a flock of birds she sent at his head.

"Get stuffed," Hermione responded mildly much to the portraits entertainment.

A bright flash of light caught Harry's eye and he stumbled over to Dumbledore's desk and glanced down at the view of his house. In spite of the Headmaster's absence the map provided in ceaseless dedication a detailed visualization of the scene. Two black figures had snuck through the wards and were met with resistance just outside the front door. Harry saw the figure through the door and held his breath. It was his dad.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked appearing by his side, her bushy hair flipping forward and hiding most of the map. "Sorry," she said, hurriedly grabbing the offending strands and hurriedly putting the whole messy mop up in a ponytail.

"That's my dad."

"Be glad he's a wizard, at least he can fight back," Hermione said, worry creeping into her voice. "Though they seem to be using a lot of Unforgiveables. Where did the other two go though?"

Harry searched the real-time model and shook his head. "I don't know. Maybe they left."

"And give up the advantage? I don't think so--oh look people in red and gold robes are popping up behind a line of trees."

"That's the cavalry."

"The Order?"

"Yes--look there's Dumbledore!" Harry pointed to a new figure that showed up by flash fire.

"Their robes are too bright," Hermione observed. "Don't they know anything about camouflage? The British army learned the hard way when the Americans copied the Native Indians in color choices,

choosing to blend into the trees and guerilla fighting instead of marching on wide open fields in easily locatable colors. The..."

"The colors have meaning."

"Besides being Gryffindor?"

"Yeah, they're the color of Fawkes' plumage. See," Harry said indicating a small flying model of the magical bird.

There was no sound to accompany the three dimensional map but the light show flaring up on the other side of the property caught their attention. Another small figure was fighting through the other two Death Eaters trying to reach the house. It was Sirius, Harry noted as the figure transformed and bit into the fleshy calf of one of the intruders.

He switched his attention back to his father, who was putting out a plethora of curses and hexes that lit the yard like a Muggle Technicolor show. It was a relief to see him still jumping around brandishing his stick like a sword, cutting down the opposition.

"Are you worried?" Hermione asked.

"Dumbledore is there and for all his faults, he won't let my parents die," Harry said with conviction. "Here he comes."

Dumbledore's figure waded through the field of lights, walking through them all without getting hit and entered the house through the back door. He didn't reappear.

Remus joined James' by his side a few moments later and together they drove the others back. The curse breakers tried to escape, but it was apparent that Apparition and Portkeys were ineffective against the newly established wards.

"Look at the bloody blighters, they're trying to flee! They should have learned better."

A spell hit Remus in the chest, who hadn't been able to raise his shield in time to block. He crumbled in silence, distracting James momentarily. A curse flew by his head and he turned back to fight.

"Heathcote's guitar!" Hermione shouted, naming the Weird Sister's guitar player, her gaze locked on a Death Eater in the front of the house.

Pale white-blond hair had slipped out from under one Death Eater's hood. The instantly recognizable trademark of the one Lucius Malfoy gave him away to the two watching him from Dumbledore's comfy office. Malfoy had stopped trading spells with James and was instead sneaking out of sight. Spell light did not reach his slinking form as he slipped up to the side of the house.

James was getting back into the rhythm of firing off a multitude of spells while dueling with the remaining Death Eater. A mottled fuchsia curse broke through James' shield, hitting him between the eyes. Harry watched in muted concern as his dad crumpled from his sentinel post and Malfoy made it past his father's and uncle's prone forms.

The Death Eater that had hit his father strolled up carefully to the doorway. He kicked James and Remus in the ribs and was apparently satisfied by the gesture. At the raising his wand, Hermione gasped. The bright green glow of the killing curse lit up the wand's tip.

"No!" Hermione cried out, covering her eyes.

Harry's mouth thinned into a grim line. He was going to watch his father die. The spell left the Death Eater's wand and sped towards the unconscious James. Unexpectedly, it exploded against a ceramic vase that was suddenly between his father and the Death Eater.

Sirius came storming out of the house, pursuing the now frantically retreating wizard. His godfather cast spell after spell, his motions a blur and his face contorted in pure, unmitigated fury. The Death Eater ducked, trying to return fire until one of Sirius' hexes hit the man, stunning the fleeing sycophant.

"It's okay, Hermione," Harry said gruffly. He stopped speaking, taking a moment to clear his throat. "You can lower your hands. Sirius saved Dad."

She lowered her hands taking a tentative glance at the board. "I don't see how you can be so calm! Your dad nearly died!"

"He's fine for now." Harry shrugged, he couldn't see anybody at the back of the house anymore. "I'm wondering about Mum though. She must be inside somewhere."

"Dumbledore's inside too. He'll find her," Hermione said comfortingly, but her voice shook with doubt, undermining the attempt.

He gave her a wan smile in appreciation. The board flickered, drawing his attention back to it just in time to see a new figure appear from out of nowhere. Harry scowled at the robed man and suddenly the muscles in his stomach clenched tightly; something wasn't right.

Suddenly his scar flared, and Harry became a receptor for a certain Dark Lord's wicked delight. He grimaced, clutching at Dumbledore's desk instead of clutching at his head, a dead giveaway if there ever was one to Hermione that something was up. As it was, she noticed the change in him immediately.

Alarmed, she pressed her cool fingers to his forehead, sweeping back his bangs. "Are you all right, Harry? Are you feeling ill? Do I need to get Madam Pomfrey for you?"

Harry shook his head. "No, I'm fine, I promise. Just an upset stomach. I need to see this still."

Hermione frowned at him but acquiesced. "If you say so," she said, doubtfully.

Colored lights, unlike anything that had flashed before, flew around the board. Dumbledore had stepped outside to deal with the figure. The spells flew faster than any of the spellwork from before and they both watched in amazement as their Headmaster dodged each and every one the other man threw. The spells hurtling between the two wizards became faster and faster until the board displayed nothing

but a white blur that blew outwards. When Harry and Hermione had finished blinking the light spots out of their eyes, the board was blank.

“What the bloody hell just happened?” Harry demanded, pulling out his wand and tapping the board in earnest.

“It apparently shorted,” Hermione said, looking at it in awe.

“Shorted?”

“Electricity shorts when it’s overrun with too much demand.”

“So?” Harry replied belligerently, hitting the desk with his fist. “What’s that got to do with the price of dragon hide in Kinzenpore?”

“Kinzenpore?” she asked, as he pushed away from the desk.

“Small magical country in Southeast Asia,” Harry clarified, looking at the overflowing shelves and running a shaking hand through his hair.

“There’s a Muggle phrase similar to that one...” Hermione started only to trail off at his glower. She looked away and ran a finger over the board, her gaze glazing over in thought. “In any case, it looks like the board was unable to handle the huge influx of magical information.”

“Now what?”

“Now we wait for Dumbledore to come back,” Hermione said matter-of-factly, tucking her wand back into her robes.

“That’s it?” Harry said.

“I know you’re scared, Harry,” Hermione said as she walked towards him. “Remember, I thought my parents were dead not too long ago.”

She took his hand and gently led him back to the chairs. She motioned for him to sit down and he did so, surprisingly meek. Then she surprised him by sitting down on his lap and wrapping her arms around his neck.

"It's okay to be scared," she murmured, stroking his hair and looking into his eyes. "Everybody gets that way now and then. If you didn't you wouldn't be--"

The door burst open and a frazzled looking Pomfrey came rushing through the doors. "Where is he?"

"Who?" Hermione asked, jumping off Harry's lap, but taking one of his hands in her own and brushing the palm with her thumb.

"That fool Headmaster with bats for brains!"

"He's not here," Harry said, glancing briefly to Hermione before keeping his gaze firmly on the school Healer.

"Well he will be, so the both of you shoo. I've been alerted about incoming patients so you need to go."

"Wait one minute," Harry began, but they were already being hustled out of the Headmaster's office by a very determined Healer. "Who's injured? My parents? Mum?"

"Run along to your dormitories immediately children. Now. Go. Shoo."

"Madam Pom--" the door swung shut on them and Harry growled in frustration followed by a good swift kick. "Damn it all to bloody hell!"

He turned around and shoved his hands in his pockets, staring a hole into the stone floor. He just had to know what was going on. Something wasn't right, he could feel it. Well if nobody would tell him then he would figure it out for himself. If only he knew how...

"Earth to Harry, this is your girlfriend speaking."

Harry looked up dumbly, blinking slowly at her. He was still trying to interpret her words but then it clicked. Like with the flash of Colin Creevey's camera, the solution was illuminated before him in all its glory. He snapped back into the present and offered Hermione a resolute grin.

“How do you feel about breaking at least a dozen Ministry and school rules?”

Hermione sputtered, stumbling backwards. He grabbed her arm to keep her from falling down the stairs. She licked her lips, staring up at him in confusion.

“What are you talking about, Harry?”

“Professor Vector’s project.”

“Which one--oh! Oh no! Harry, we couldn’t!”

“How do you know that?”

“Because it would break more than just a few rules! We will be expelled for certain!”

“We could have already done it and not doing it could change history,” Harry cajoled. “We have the means. My Time Turner can go back four hours. That’s plenty of time to make a difference, Hermione.”

Hermione kept shaking her head, her bushy hair flying around wildly. “No, we can’t.”

“Yes, we can,” he wheedled, grabbing her shoulders to stop her movement. “We can make sure my parents make it out alive.”

“Wouldn’t we have seen us on the map?”

“Not if we were in the house,” Harry countered. “Dumbledore turned on the map little over an hour ago. Nobody would see us sneaking onto the property.”

“Show a little faith,” Harry said, pulling out his wand and casting a quick silent *accio*. “What’s the worst that can happen? We know we’re either in the Infirmary or in Dumbledore’s office so we’re not going to run into our past selves and bollocks up things that way.”

“Expulsion?”

“And here I thought you were going to mention us dying.”

“That too,” Hermione stated primly, a slight smile creasing the corner of her mouth.

“How about it? Come with me to rescue my parents?”

“Fine, but if your time piece really goes back four hours you better show me your calculations later.”

“Deal!” he said, clapping her on the back. “Good to see you thinking we’re going to come through this alive.”

“It’s better than looking on the dead side of things,” she quipped just as the time piece flew around the staircase.

Harry caught the flying object and quickly expanded the length of the band with a nonverbal spell. Hermione purposefully held her wrist out and Harry crossed his over it and draped the watch over them. Together they got it bound tight and secure. They turned the hand-setting knob four hours back and clicked it into place starting the process of traveling backwards through time.

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 20°«««°»»»°

Chapter 21

That was how Harry and Hermione found themselves in the middle of staircase roughly four hours earlier. Harry quickly unfastened the watch and slipped it into his pocket.

"I used an hourglass," Hermione said with a shake of her head. "It can only take us back two hours."

"You've tried it then?"

She shook her head again, motioning for them to go down the stairs. "I didn't want to risk expulsion. My calculations are infallible though. It would have been a very secure jump."

"I was wondering myself about multiple jumps. For instance, if we were back in time like we are now, could we jump again and go backward another four hours?"

"Too risky," Hermione inserted as they walked down the winding staircase. "Too many of yourselves running around and the second jump could easily tear your body to pieces."

"That's one hypothesis. I would personally like to test it out at another time when we could goof off and snog for all of them in a different broom cupboard--say number sixty-three through seventy-four, and not worry about rescuing my parents."

Hermione smiled warmly and grabbed his hand. "Since we are breaking laws, we might as well be thorough. Come on, we need to go to the clock tower and make sure we know when we are in time. After all when we're punished for this it should at least be accurate; no chance for screw-ups."

"If you want to screw, I'm up--" she threw him a nasty glare, "--for it," he finished with a smirk.

"Mr. Pot--"

"Shh!" Harry shushed suddenly, grabbing her waist and pulling her flushed against his chest as he fell backwards against the stairwell.

“Harry!” Hermione hissed, pushing his hands away.

“Shh,” Harry repeated, tapping her head and then his with his wand. The cool discomforting feeling of an egg yolk dribbling down them accompanied his spellwork.

“What are you doing, Har--”

Harry clamped a hand over her mouth just as Daniel came traipsing down the stairs from Dumbledore’s office. Hermione stopped struggling against him immediately, calming down to watch.

Daniel was pulling on his cuffs and smoothing down his robes as he went. On his face was a pompous grin, the mere sight of which made Harry’s blood boil. He was ruffling his hair every few seconds, trying in Harry’s opinion to make it look windswept.

“Poncy little bugger,” said Hermione as she exhaled.

“Nancy boy,” Harry returned, linking his fingers through hers and starting down the stairs after his twin. “What do you think he talked to Dumbledore about?”

“It couldn’t have been rescuing you, that was the other night. Maybe it was something else?”

“He was puffed up like a bloody peacock.”

“And how is that different from the rest of the time?” Hermione asked dryly, arching a brow at him.

Harry thought about it for a moment. “Okay, good point. Onto the clock tower, then?” said Harry as he offered his arm.

Hermione accepted his proffered arm as they walked through the castle to the south tower. The courtyard was surrounded by high moss covered walls, despite the chill of the December air and the softly falling snow. Water cascaded from a small fountain sprouting out of the back wall into a little pond filled with orange pumpkin fish and tiny metallic galleon fish. Steam wafted from the pond, misting

the courtyard. There were no students around because of classes and the idyllic scene had Hermione sighing in delight.

"I love this courtyard," she murmured, letting go of his arm and rushing to the little pond to observe the fishes swimming in lazy circles. Silently, Harry canceled the disillusionment charms.

"It's two hours before dinner starts," said Harry, glancing up at the clock face. "I think the ward breakers will be starting on my parents' house around dinner, because Dumbledore will be eating in the Great Hall with everyone else and won't be easy to contact or alert."

"That's very clever," Hermione said, sitting down on the stone ledge while pushing her hair behind her. "He of course could still be reached but contact with him would be slower. The office is his hub."

Harry nodded as he sat down beside her. "I suppose we have a little time. Maybe I could use Hedwig to send a message to my parents."

"Would they believe you?" asked Hermione with a sad little frown creasing her brows together.

"If Dumbledore didn't, probably not, but I could still try."

"Maybe. But wouldn't it be better to alert the MLE?"

"I doubt the ministry would believe two seventeen year old kids not yet graduated from Hogwarts."

She let out a little huff. "I hate to say it, but you're right."

"I think we should find Serion," Harry said all of a sudden, looking back to the clock tower. "I mean, there's a chance he's still alive, isn't there?"

"Harry," Hermione said softly, reaching out to touch his arm. He glanced down at her. "Daniel said--"

"I know what he said," Harry retorted, his face screwing up in a look of absolute rage. "But the bastard was trying to impress you, so there's a chance he was lying."

Hermione removed her hand and replied easily, "Of course. How do you propose to find him?"

Harry paced three agitated steps away from her before abruptly facing the entrance of the courtyard. "Accio Serion."

"You can't summon living things, Harry," she told him gently. "If you could then You-Know... Voldemort would have been summoned ages ago into a cell at Azkaban. There'd be no need for law enforcement. There are other ways to locate your snake. Where do you think Daniel would take Serion? Maybe that's a better place to start?"

Harry spared her a glance and nodded at her words. Hermione seemed unsure of what to say to his tense and anxious figure, so she offered him the comfort of her hand, interlacing his stiff fingers with her own. As he was about to try again in Parseltongue something flew around the corner.

When Serion's body came whizzing through the entranceway, Hermione cried for Harry. Even from a distance the flopping of the snake's body wasn't a good sign. Tears poured freely down her cheeks at the look of anguish that settled on Harry's features as he gathered Serion's body in his trembling hands.

"Serion?" Harry questioned thickly, clearing his throat to break the lump that settled there.

"I'm so sorry, Harry," Hermione cried, crushing him in a tight hug.

"I'm going to kill him!" Harry shouted, yanking out of her embrace. "I'll kill him right now!"

"You shouldn't do anything rash, Harry!"

"Then I'll rearrange his fucking face," he growled, clutching Serion's body against his chest. "I'll break every one of his teeth! I'll cut off his nose and feed it to him!"

"Harry," Hermione pleaded.

"What Hermione? You think I should let this go? He killed Serion on purpose!"

"He didn't even seem to know you liked snakes much less had one as a pet."

"So that--what? Excuses him?" Harry sneered, his eyes itching. "I don't bloody well think so!"

Hermione approached him slowly and calmly took Serion's body from his suddenly limp fingers. "No, it doesn't pardon him for taking a life without purpose, but you shouldn't be talking about killing your brother either."

Harry turned away and scrubbed his eyes, cursing at himself--at his brother. "He needs to be taken down a peg."

"I don't disagree, Harry," she started, laying the snake on the stone ledge of the pond. She touched his shoulder, turning him around to face her. His eyes were bloodshot and dry when she met them with her own watery ones. "There are better ways to deflate his overblown head. Besides right now, you have other more important things to worry about. Serion's burial, your parents--"

"Oh, jeez," he muttered, closing his eyes and pressing his forehead against hers. Hermione wrapped her arms around his waist. She too closed her eyes and shed the last remnants of her tears, leaving them swollen and dry.

"There's still a little time left before we need to leave the school grounds," Hermione offered, rubbing the small of his back, before taking a step back from him. "We could give Serion a burial now."

"Where?" he asked with a shuddering breath, stepping back and collecting himself. "His favorite place to be was inside the castle and that isn't suitable."

"Out by the Whomping Willow?"

Harry shrugged mutely, feeling curiously blank compared to a moment ago. It was like the fight was knocked out of him, leaving him

stunned, still absorbing the blow. Serion had been his best friend after Hedwig, maybe even closer after coming to Hogwarts and spending the term by him. He could still hear Serion's dry sarcastic voice telling him was being an idiot, exclaiming that he was worth ten Dumbledores, and declaring Harry his human; those had been Serion's final words.

The masochistic side of him wondered if Serion had greeted Daniel like he would have Harry, a friend, thinking the sight of him must mean that the trouble was over. He wondered when Serion figured out the difference, if he had pleaded desperately with Daniel or if he had been too drained of life to even raise a fang against his twin. Had he gone quietly, accepting his death? In his final moments, had he blamed Harry for not protecting him--not being there for him?

Hermione prodded him gently, startling him. Without noticing, they had left the courtyard far behind. The branches of the tree were stripped of leaves. To Harry it looked cold. He couldn't feel the wind against his skin but knew his robes were fluttering haphazardly in it. It had to be cold. It was December.

Handing Serion to him, Hermione took out her wand and conjured a small flat box. She strengthened it with a half-dozen charms to keep it sturdy and impenetrable. Numbly, Harry placed Serion in it, creating a few layers of coils before gently setting the snake's head on one of them. It looked like Serion was being lazy, taking a nap on his mattress in the afternoon sun. But Harry knew he wasn't. The imagery was just his mind trying to soften the horror of it.

Harry pulled his wand out and created a hole in the ground, well within the Whomping Willow's reach and flew the small box into it. With a final flick the dirt jumped into the hole, sealing his friend in darkness, the ache in his chest compounded, making it hard to breathe once again.

"Keep him safe, would you?" Harry begged the tree, which trembled at his words, almost as if saying it would.

Hermione grasped his hand, drawing him away from the cheerlessness of the scene. "Come, Harry," was all she said, leading him out towards the AMAS just outside the castle wards.

“Why did he do it?” he asked, looking over his shoulder.

“I don’t know,” she said, sniffing and dabbing her nose.

Just before the tree was out of their line of sight, Harry spun around.
§*It’s time to for you to meet the tall grasses. May we meet again. Farewell Serion.*§ he hissed softly under his breath.

“What was that?”

“Nothing, saying goodbye, that’s all.”

Harry turned away and dashed up to the winged-boar pillars guarding the entrance gate to Hogwarts. The road leading away from the castle was lined with tall trees on either side. Snow was falling heavier outside of Hogwarts, coating the path before them in a blanket of white. When Hermione stopped in front of him, Harry held open the wrought iron gate for her so she could get through, following her quickly and shutting the gate with an audible click.

The AMAS wasn’t far now. Harry scuffed his shoe in the mushy snow revealing gravel. He kicked it watching the loose dirt scatter away from him. A slightly larger bit of rock a few feet away was toed loose and kicked ahead, landing in a tiny puddle. Harry noted it’s location as did Hermione. She sent a sympathetic glance his way, her breath fogging the air between them much like his own.

They reached the rock and Harry kicked it forward again. He did it twice more before it skittered over into the snow covered grass beyond reach. The AMAS was now just around the bend, hidden in a pocket of grass. This one was cornered off on four sides by hazardous signs, all in keeping with Muggle preconceptions that Hogwarts was a rundown castle.

“Do you know how to Apparate?” Harry asked, looking up at her as he stepped onto the snowed in field.

She shook her head yes, accepting his hand as she crossed the magical barrier. “Yes, though I haven’t been able to go get my permits. First, because I was with my parents in South America and then because of school.”

“That’s okay, I have a permit for Side-Along Apparition.”

Hermione flashed a quick smile, pulling her hair into a ponytail to get it off her face. “What do I do?”

Harry placed the small hand he was holding around his waist and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “Nothing. I do all the work; just relax.”

She raised an eyebrow, a quirky smile creasing the corner of her mouth. “Of course, *darling*,” she said cheekily. “Just don’t go without me.”

“I’ll make sure you and I go at the same time, Miss Sassafras,” he replied bemusedly. “Now hang onto your cauldron cups...”

To Harry the uncomfortable feeling of being squeezed through a tube made Apparation the worst way of traveling. In other words, it felt like the air was being sucked from his lungs while one of the rhinoceros’ magical cousins, the erumpent, sat on his chest crushing him. Because this time he wasn’t hopping through space alone, he had to concentrate on bringing her with him. His magic was surprisingly willing to help him with; ensuring that when they arrived it wouldn’t be heralded by a loud crack.

When Hermione entered with him back into real space, it was with a small popping noise. It wasn’t snowing in Ottery St. Catchpole, but it was still chilly enough for their breath to fog the air. With barely a glance around to acknowledge the new surroundings, Harry tugged Hermione over to a clump of trees. Peering through the underbrush, they surveyed the Potter property.

The Quidditch pitch across from them was silent, lit only by the smallest slimmer of a moon. Birds were chirruping in the surrounding thicket carrying on with their business. The Death Eaters hadn’t arrived yet it seemed. Briefly Harry wondered if Hermione’s appearance would trigger the alarms as he was fairly certain he was keyed into them himself, or if the wards would only react with the ward breakers’ tampering.

The house itself was cheerful. Lights were on in the upstairs master's wing and all along the downstairs. Hermione silently pointed out the figures of his parents preparing a quiet meal in the kitchen. His mother was laughing at something his father said as they placed the food onto the small square breakfast table.

"Follow me," Harry said, ducking through the brush and scurrying toward the house.

Hermione followed, imitating his low crouch and rushed to the side of the house. They met up under the kitchen window pressed against the cool stone. Harry then silently cast several charms on himself and Hermione.

"What did you do?" Hermione asked, only recognizing the disillusionment charm.

"Silencing charm on our feet to keep us from getting caught, hear-me-nots on our larynxes with the added addition of us being keyed into each other, and a simple protection spell on our clothes. The protection isn't that great, but in situations like this it's better to have it and not need it than need it and not have it," he said, finishing with a what-can-you-do-shrug.

Curious, Hermione asked, "What does it protect against?"

"One standard dueling level Diricawl or Tadfoal spell."

"So like a tripping jinx."

"Basically," he said while creating two Portkeys out of bits of loose dirt and rocks.

Hermione arched an eyebrow skeptically. "Harry, we saw them casting Unforgiveables like they were passing out candy in Honeydukes."

Shaking his head, Harry handed her a Portkey while muttering sardonically, "Next time we fight Death Eaters it's on you to find a spell that will give us latent protection over Unforgiveables and when you do I'll let you do the layering of spells on us."

“Prat.”

“The activate word is Hogwarts. You’ll land by the gates. Come on,” Harry urged, “We should get inside the house.”

As they crawled through the hydrangea bushes to the side door they heard two distant pops signaling the arrival of the Death Eater ward breakers. Harry turned around to watch their progress. They were huddled against the woods, only visible because of their white masks glowing in the dim moonlight.

“If it wasn’t necessary for them to break through the wards to alert Dumbledore of their presence I’d stun them right where they stood.”

“Ward breaking is tedious if you don’t want to trip booby traps or alarms,” Hermione informed.

“Luckily,” Harry said, nodding towards the Death Eaters, “They mess it up somehow.”

“Well if Dumbledore really did do the warding, every minute they don’t screw up is admirable.”

“Yeah, admirable,” Harry said, using his mother’s unlocking charm and pushing open the door to the hallway separating the common room from the kitchen.

Slipping inside, the duo made their way through the house to the front hall and stairway. Hermione made a move toward the staircase when Harry stopped her with a warm hand on her arm.

“I think we should watch this area. We’ll be able to see where my mother goes and watch my father duel.”

“Sure,” she said, sitting down on one of the padded chairs in the hall.

Harry glanced around, spying a ceramic vase just inside the doorway in front of a mirror on a side table. He walked over and opened the closet noting all the coats, goulashes, and umbrellas within. They could be used as projectiles if needed. He shut the door and paced back to Hermione.

“Dumbledore can sort of see through Disillusionment charms. I mean I think he can see the magic and the basic form of the person but not any details, so we should get a little more hidden than we are now.”

“Can he really?” she asked with big eyes. Harry nodded. “Wow, that’s just amazing. No wonder he bested Grindelwald!”

“Or it’s just some sort of altered eye charm,” Harry replied, walking over to the dinning room and peering inside.

Hermione frowned. “I guess,” she said rather reluctantly.

“In here,” Harry said over his shoulder, stepping fully into the dinning room. “We should be able to see what’s happening and not be in the direct line of sight of anybody coming or going.”

Harry leaned against the opposite wall, choosing the best view into the hall. Hermione looked around and walked over to the potted plant and faced the door, getting a slanted look out into the hall towards the kitchens.

A few minutes later they saw James and Lily laughing softly as they exited the kitchen. He was ruffling his hair, making it appear windswept before draping his arm around her shoulders and steering her toward the common room.

“Let’s listen to the Wireless for a bit, see if that fellow--what was his name again dear?”

“Jasper Swishdil, you pea-brain,” she said fondly, as they disappeared out of view.

“Right,” James replied with a grin. “See if that Jasper fellow is on.”

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 21°«««°»»»°

Chapter 22

An inhuman wail split the air, startling Hermione so badly she knocked the potted plant over. Harry shot her a concerned look just as a bright flash of light lit up the inside of the house. The wards had dropped.

"It's starting," he told her unnecessarily, his mouth firming into a grim line.

James and Lily burst out of the common room, both looking around frantically. James held Lily back with a hand as he crept up toward the windows on either side of the front door. Lily rushed out to the side door.

"I count two, Lils. How many do you see?"

She craned her neck, trying to peer out into the darkness that had settled around the house. "I can't be certain, but there looks to be six back here--"

A trilling call erupted in the night air; all at once soothing and frightening. It was a song meant to rally the troops and send enemies scattering to the four corners of the earth.

"Fawkes and Dumbledore just showed up," Harry said, steadfastly watching over his parents.

As if she could hear him, his mother echoed his declaration. Lily then quickly amended her earlier statement to mean that there were six Phoenix members in the back.

"That's a relief," James murmured, throwing open the door and firing off a sequence of spells.

"James I don't have my wand!" Lily cried as she frenziedly patted her pockets.

"Morgana, Lils! Run upstairs!"

"First let me throw open the back door--"

"No!" James shouted taking his attention off the Death Eaters for a moment. A spell whizzed by his ear. Cursing he swung around and shouted rapidly, "*Confundo! Conjunctiva! Mobilidrytt!* There could be Death Eaters. Get your wand!"

"I'm going! I'm going!" she shouted, racing away from the side door without another thought. As she ran by the dining room, Harry and Hermione could hear her muttering, "I can't believe I left it on the nightstand."

Harry crept closer to the doorway, watching his mother's progress up the stairs. He turned around and whispered to Hermione. "Follow her please and be careful!"

"On it," she murmured and crossed the length of the dining room swiftly.

Loud scuffling noises and shouts rang in the backyard as the Order grappled with the unseen Death Eaters. James threw a glance over his shoulder, checking on the help that should be arriving soon. Harry nearly growled. It wasn't smart to look away from your enemies.

A blue spell hit the doorjamb, missing James by centimeters. He cussed wildly and threw eight spells in quick succession. Half of them were schoolyard jinxes, meant to be dodged so that the unfriendly hexes would strike. A green killing curse blew past James who ducked. Harry flinched as it hit the floor, breaking the stone up and scattering it everywhere. He had to dodge the larger pieces of debris.

Fawkes trilled again, announcing the wizard at the side door. Dumbledore unlocked the door with the complex unlocking charm his mother created and stepped inside. He surveyed the hall, wand at the ready.

"We think one got into the house," Dumbledore announced, conjuring a phoenix Patronus and pulling from his temple a thought. A single word united the two and it was off, flying up the staircase and out of sight. "I warned Lily. Do you need help James?"

"Is the cavalry far behind you?" James asked, quickly blocking a nasty curse thrown at him behind two moderate ones.

“Sirius and Remus are tying up the loose ends with the one we captured. They’ll be along shortly.”

James nodded. “Good. Go and find Lily.”

Harry heard a feminine scream and only had to look at the faces of the two men in the hall to know it wasn’t his mum’s. It was Hermione’s. Harry waffled for a moment with indecision. He stayed, daring not to risk revealing his presence to Dumbledore and ducked back around the corner of the wall as the wizard hurried by on his way up the stairs.

A thin man rushed through the side door calling out for James.

“Remus! Come help me! Quick-- *Tarantella! Pigmentum! Breacanbainam!*”

“How many?” Remus asked, joining James by the front door.

“Two,” came the terse reply. “They’re sharp too.”

“That’s an oxymoron,” Remus murmured, throwing a set of jinxes at one of the Death Eaters outside.

Harry couldn’t tell what was happening anymore. Remus was blocking his line of sight. He felt around for the new warding that was about to be set up and hit a small shimmer that connected to Bill Weasley. Harry had never felt anything like it before, but with adrenaline pumping through his veins and the tons of raw magic filling him, he had done the improbable. Master warders were the only ones who could do it and they had years of experience under their belts.

Deciding to shrug it off, Harry concentrated on one clear fact: the wards weren’t going to get up in time. James whooped signaling the change in the course of the skirmish. The Death Eaters were being driven back and without the wards up, they were going to escape! Harry threw some of the power at his command down the shimmering line of ward magic to Bill. A disorienting afterimage crossed Harry’s vision. Focusing on a piece of debris helped to rid him of it.

“Aggh!” Remus garbled, collapsing into a boneless heap. The curse had hit his chest and where it made contact the fabric was singed, exposing the burnt skin beneath.

“Remus!” James shouted in distress, glancing away from the enemies again.

Harry saw Lucius separate from Watson in that instance and sidle out of sight. Biting back a warning, Harry just gripped his wand tighter. Spellfire broke out again, but James had trouble getting back into the swing of things. Harry threw a shield or two at Remus’ crumpled form when he saw spells fly off target. James was too busy struggling with the Death Eater to notice the translucent shimmer of a shield being cast.

Then a sickly fuchsia curse broke through James’ shield, toppling him. Harry glanced over his shoulder quickly looking for Sirius but couldn’t spy the dog animagus anywhere. As he turned back, Lucius snuck into the house. Harry was too slow to fire and could only watch the older Malfoy disillusion himself and shimmer out of sight.

Cursing his stupidity, Harry cast several wet paint spells at the walls hoping to reveal Lucius. The paint hit the walls and slopped uniformly down into a puddle on the floor.

Lucius was driven out of Harry’s mind as Watson’s heavy footfalls plodded onto the porch. “Not so tough are you, Potter,” he sneered, spitting on the ground beside the prone figure of his father. “You and your wolfie are no match for me,” he chuckled evilly, kicking Remus in the ribs.

Harry looked for Sirius again, but the muffled oof that escaped his father’s prone form reminded him that not everything viewed on the board was as it seemed. The green glow of the killing curse illuminated the tip of Watson’s wand and Harry burst into action. He banished the vase from the sideboard towards James. The killing curse struck it, sending shards flying as it shattered into a dozen pieces.

A black dog flew past the dining room at the same moment, transfiguring back into the tall charming man it started off as.

“James!” Sirius bellowed, his angry countenance frightening Watson back a few steps. “Get away from him you filthy bastard!”

Sirius hurled six spells sharply, their aim true. Watson stumbled back trying to desperately defend himself from the onslaught. He managed to get a few in, but so enraged was Sirius that his magic was shorting. Spells leapt from his wand that he didn’t say or formulate, shields shimmered into view when he didn’t defend himself. Harry never saw accidental magic work so hard to keep someone safe. Stunners whizzed out of Sirius’ wand in a complicated pattern that couldn’t be dodged. Watson dropped like a stone.

Sirius sagged suddenly, the flow of adrenaline and accidental magic leaving him weak and shaking. Harry cast a simple invigorating spell and saw the effects immediately. Sirius straightened and jogged back to Remus and James. He ran a few prognosis spells, frowning heavily at their results. Eventually he cast a *mobilicorpus* on both of them and led them back into the house.

Bill Weasley ambled inside looking sprightly. “Easiest bit of warding I’ve ever done. Record timing too,” he said before noticing the floating men. “James and Remus! What happened?”

Sirius shook his head. “Bloodsucking Death Eaters happened.”

“Vampires?” Bill asked confused. “I thought we were still trying to persuade them not to join You-Know-Who.”

“Not vampires.”

“But you--” Bill shook his head. “Never mind. I’ve got Portkeys for Dumbledore’s office. Let’s strap them on and give the trigger words. Poppy will take good care of them and then we can go find Dumbledore and Lily.”

Sirius held his wand at the ready. “You do the Portkeys, I’ll stand guard.”

Bill nodded and pulled out of his pockets two gold medallions on leather. He strung them around their necks and waved a hand over

them, muttering quietly. In a flash Remus and James disappeared and Bill stood up.

“Did you capture any Death Eaters?” Bill asked, brushing off his hands.

Sirius jerked his thumb to the left, indicating Watson, who was still stunned. “Think him over to Headquarters?”

“What’d he do about that female we caught in the back?”

“Sent her to Moody at Headquarters.”

“Then Headquarters for this one.”

Bill unsuccessfully summoned for wands on the unconscious Death Eater and by using similar spells made sure the bloke was clean before sticking a large red button on the man’s forehead. “Prisoner,” said Bill and the man was no more.

Harry watched them climb up the stairs to find the Headmaster and his mother. Fervently he hoped Hermione was all right. He rested his hand on the banister and listened for the sound of their footfalls. He waited until the duo was halfway up the stairs before he followed a few steps.

Thunder ripped apart the sky outside, causing Harry to jump. A flash of light echoed in the sky--a reversal of natural law, and suddenly there was a cloaked figure standing in the front of the property.

Voldemort’s red eyes gleamed dangerously in the night. His eyes seemed to spy Harry who was rooted to the spot. Suddenly the wizard cackled, throwing his head back with abandonment as he laughed.

“Come out, come out, Potter.”

Harry cautiously stepped away from the stairs and edged toward the door, avoiding the pits and cracks in the floor. He hesitated for just a second by the door before taking a deep breath and breeching the last barrier between him and Voldemort.

Voldemort smirked. "Good. Good. Now tell me did dear old Albus let you home early for the holidays? I was expecting just your parents, but you are, as is said, a bonus."

Harry tried to speak, but had to clear his throat. "No," he croaked, fingers twirling over his wand nervously. He hadn't faced him before like this without his brother in some fashion. It was a little surreal for him, standing there before the darkest wizard in centuries and exchanging pleasantries.

"That's good. I'd hate to see Albus giving into favoritism when he's always claimed to be so impartial."

Harry fought the urge to tell him that Albus was not impartial at all. It took some effort but he managed to ignore the desire to tattle on the old wizard. "What do you want here?" he asked, having nothing better to say in the end.

"Well to kill you obviously," Voldemort said, amused, his voice slick like honey.

Harry shook his head. "No, before you realized I was here."

"Oh, that," Voldemort waved his hand. "Seems like such a small matter now."

"Do you like being the cynosure of every conversation we have or are you just this annoying all the time," Harry commented irreverently, shifting his weight into a more balanced position.

Voldemort sneered, snake-like nostrils flaring in the pale moonlight. "I think I'll put you under the imperious curse and watch you kill your parents. How would you like that Potter? Would you cry for your mummy and daddy?"

Harry said nothing, choosing to glare at the dark wizard before him and hope to bore holes in his head.

"Well, baby Potter, would you?"

"Grief is not weakness," Harry said at last, mentally urging himself to do something--anything besides conversing with Riddle, who was surely toying with him.

"All emotions are weakness," Voldemort countered, circling Harry like a snake watching his prey move closer to him.

"Then you are weakened," Harry replied, grimacing when a spike of hatred slammed through his scar.

"I am never weak," he hissed, his countenance contorting grotesquely.

"Get away from the boy!" Albus roared, bursting through the front doors in a shower of splinters.

"Albus!" Riddle hissed in surprise.

"Leave now, Tom," Dumbledore commanded, pointing his wand steady at the Dark Lord. "While you still can."

"I do not go by that common Muggle name anymore, Albus," Voldemort said lightly, throwing the first spell without an incantation.

Dumbledore blocked it easily, returning fire quickly and with intent. "Run, Harry!" he yelled, blocking a barrage of incoming curses.

"So it was the real baby Potter," Voldemort said in surprise. "I thought the dialogue was a *bit* wittier than usual."

Harry ducked a dark blue spell, leaping away from another fast approaching. Dumbledore jumped in front of the third, raising a silver shield that gonged loudly. "You can still get away," he said quietly. "Remember our conversation in my office. You do not have to serve him."

Harry stared at the Headmaster incredulously, his anger rising swiftly, and his skin burned with the heat of it.

"Whispering secrets, are we?" Voldemort crooned, sending a flurry of spells, all of them dangerous. "Tisk, tisk, Dumbledore. Didn't your mother ever teach you secrets hurt everybody? You. Should. Share."

The final three words were punctuated by three blazing green spells that broke through the silver shield Dumbledore still powered. He grunted, falling backwards a few paces from the spells' force.

Harry whipped his wand in Voldemort's direction and threw a series of irritating schoolyard jinxes, hoping a few of them were new to Hogwarts and unknown to the general population. Voldemort slapped them away, firing back an illegal hex, which Harry narrowly avoided. Blanching, Harry realized just how close he'd come to losing his lungs.

"Harry--" Dumbledore warned, whipping his wand in a large arc, sending Voldemort flying backwards.

The Dark Lord landed with a grunt and righted himself quickly parrying Dumbledore's spellfire so fast his movements were blurred. Harry dodged another horrific hex designed to turn one's insides to their outsides. It exploded in the grass, sending dirt and grass everywhere.

Dumbledore threw him a stern look. "You're not helping yourself, Harry, by staying here."

Harry snorted, tossing a silent *accio* on a tree. "You're telling me staying here and helping you doesn't prove that I'm innocent? That just bloody figures."

"Secrets again? Don't you two ever learn?" Voldemort said loudly, his voice heavy with mocking disappointment, ducking under the tree trunk as it sped overhead.

"Do I have to die for you to prove myself?" Harry asked scathingly, whipping his wand and banishing the trunk back toward the Dark Lord. Voldemort cracked it in two with an unknown spell and threw two more at them. Harry intercepted both spells, turned towards the Headmaster and shouted, "Go to hell Dumbledore!"

"Now, that's more like it!" Voldemort cackled. "You may just show what you're made of yet, Potter!"

Harry crackling with indignation and overwhelming bitterness whirled on Voldemort. "What do you know?" he jibbed recklessly, his magic

roiling and boiling beneath the surface of his control. Give me *retribution!*§ he cried to the heavens, surprising both wizards.

Before Riddle could respond Harry's anger ignited the magic stewing dangerously beneath the surface. Harry screamed wordlessly in pain as it ripped through his barriers and released an electrifying surge of power that made his hair stand on end and his skin crawl. It rolled outward in a circle with Harry as the pinnacle.

It stuck Voldemort and Dumbledore on either side of the enraged Ravenclaw. Dumbledore tried to raise a shield as Voldemort in turn, attempted to flee, but the power tore through the half-formed safeguard and clung tightly to Riddle. As it struck, both older wizards howled in agony dropping like poisoned doxies to the ground, their bodies bucking wildly.

Harry stood there with arms outspread, as all of his life's suffering spilled forth into Dumbledore and Voldemort, seeking to break them. The pain flowed away from Harry and into the two before him in a spectacular display of wild magic. Dispassionately, Harry watched the two of them writhe. Dumbledore had tears staining his beard, wetting it with his sorrow. Voldemort managed to scramble to his knees, before the magic swept over him again, drawing him back under.

Lifetimes of disillusionment, abandonment, and pain broke over them. Voldemort, hardened by his own experiences, rose above it and staggered away from Harry as swiftly as he could. Racked with tremors that could not be stopped, the evil wizard stared at Harry in an odd mixture of terror and contempt.

§You have not seen the last of me Harry Potter,§ he hissed, whipping his cloak around him and disappearing into the night air.

Harry stepped over to Dumbledore and looked down at the powerful wizard. He bent down to lend a hand but suddenly Fawkes dove from the sky, separating the two. Harry jumped back, his face blanking of all emotion. With the phoenix's help, Dumbledore gathered his strength to rise. Tears still rolled down the Headmaster's face as he looked upon Harry.

"I--" Dumbledore said, stopping hesitantly. "I can not say just how sorry I am, Harry." He didn't say anything, as Fawkes too shed pearly white tears. Dumbledore looked away and sighed, aging fifty years over the next ten seconds. "We must go to the Headquarters. You and your family can not stay here."

"The Death Eaters?"

"Malfoy escaped and is no doubt arranging his alibi as we speak, that is, if he's not reporting to Voldemort."

Harry's jaw tightened. "I heard Hermione scream earlier. I take it you found her and that's how you knew it was me?"

Dumbledore nodded. "I'm afraid she got a nasty scare from the Death Eater Alfred Duffin."

Harry nodded, tucking his wand back in his robe pockets and staring off into the forest. Aurors popped in along the perimeter. Muffled shouts for quiet and order reached them where they stood. Two captains signaled for the team of Aurors to approach.

Dumbledore sighed heavily, ignoring their advance for the moment. "Where do we go from here Harry?"

Harry turned his head and stared at the Headmaster. "Where can we possibly go, Headmaster, that you haven't burned the bridge to?"

"Surely there is but some way, Harry," Dumbledore beseeched.

"I should leave before the Aurors come."

"Yes," he agreed, forcing some cheer into his voice. "Fawkes will escort you to your parents."

Harry shook his head. "I want to see Hermione."

Dumbledore frowned briefly before agreeing. "Of course you do. She's at Hogwarts, resting in a room I gave her to keep her dorm mates from bothering her."

"Will Fawkes take me to her?" he asked, watching the phoenix that sat on the Headmaster's shoulder.

"Immediately," he promised and Fawkes flew over to Harry pulling him away in a flash of fire just as the Auror captain shouted for Dumbledore's identity.

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Hermione shrieked when Harry flashed down into the room. "Harry!" she sobbed, running over to him and throwing her arms around his neck. "I was so worried!"

Harry wrapped his arms around her and rested his cheek on her shoulder. "I have things to tell you," he murmured.

She pulled back slightly blinking up at him. "Can't it wait?"

Harry shook his head and led her over to her bed. "No. It can't."

He proceeded to tell her about his beginning years at Hogwarts and all the adventures he had gone on. He explained Daniel's deception in a way even she couldn't refute had she wanted to. When he told her about tonight, she got up and paced away from him, staring searchingly out into the night scene before her.

"Why won't you take credit!" Hermione screamed in frustration, whirling around to face Harry.

"The wizarding world is ready for a hero like Daniel," Harry murmured, walking over to her. He dragged her to him and kissed her neck softly, just below her ear. "Their attention goes to the boy who they are pinning all their hopes on to get rid of their greatest fear, Lord Voldemort. When they see the Potters they see just one son. The chosen son. Even in the Potter house, that is how it goes. The wizarding world is not ready for the insignificant twin to not be so insignificant, otherwise they would have seen the truth."

Hermione pushed herself away from him, breathing heavily. "What are you saying? That you're--you're the Boy-Who-Lived?"

Instead of answering directly he said, "Dumbledore was the first to arrive on the scene after the fact. He revived my parents and they ran to the nursery. My brother was wide awake and crying, while I was asleep. We both had scars and it was determined by the Headmaster that mine was received through proximity to the magical backlash. My brother was said to be the Boy-Who-Lived, having survived the killing curse straight on because the curse is violent and his scar was harsher looking compared to my own."

"That's ridiculous!"

"Dumbledore also believes that the 'S' stands for Slytherin and as Voldemort portrays himself as the last heir of Slytherin, what better way to mark the equal but to give him the rights to the family line?"

"So Daniel is the Boy-Who-Lived?" Hermione summed up, a frown marring her brow. "If that's true, why are you such a great wizard while your brother is barely able to hold his wand properly?"

Harry ran a hand through his hair, making it messier than usual. "It's not that Daniel isn't a great wizard, Hermione."

"Then what is it?"

Harry looked up and shook his head. "I'm just a much better wizard than he is."

"But that doesn't make any sense, Harry!"

"Sure it does. Ask Dumbledore to explain it to you!" Harry said, crossly. "After all, you put all your faith in him. He's never wrong, is he?"

"Harry, why would Dumbledore say one of you was the Boy-Who-Lived if he couldn't prove it conclusively?"

"I don't know, alright?" Harry grumbled, stalking away from her. "But since he did, my parents have been more taken with Daniel than with me."

“Oh, Harry...” Hermione whispered the fight leaving her. She walked up behind him and wrapped her arms around him.

Harry sighed, resting his forehead against the cool stone of the fireplace. “After that Halloween, I was the first to show signs of magic. I was five, I think. I...”

“What Harry?” Hermione encouraged.

“I made a toy snake,” Harry said wearily, turning his head to face her. “I even went around talking to it. Mum and Dad were... livid, to put it lightly.”

Hermione hugged him fiercely, trying to heal the hurt in him that his voice betrayed. “And what about Daniel?”

“Daniel didn’t show signs of magic until he was nine years old. He summoned a toy that I repaired after he destroyed it. Our parents were so excited, they let Daniel keep the toy. His magic showing up so late was explained away. They said that he must have depleted his power levels to such an extent surviving the curse and it must have taken all that time for them to be replenish.”

“I’m so sorry Harry,” she cried, hugging him closer, weeping for him.

Harry patted her back, rubbing in soothing circles, his gaze falling on the worn stuffed couches. “I personally think,” he mused aloud, “that he just wanted the toy.”

“And now what?” she asked into his shoulder. “Now that Dumbledore has seen you do something so powerful he can’t deny that he might have been mistaken all these years?”

Harry shrugged. “He’ll probably reexamine everything he knows, but even knowing the extent of my magical prowess won’t be enough to prove that Daniel wasn’t the Boy-Who-Lived. I don’t want him to tell my parents his suspicions. Tonight I’ve cleansed myself of things that I use to want--like their unconditional love. From now on it’s just me, Harry; the wizarding world can take it or leave it.”

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 22°«««°»»»°

Chapter 23

Harry spent the night with her, preferring not to return to Ravenclaw tower and his year mates. They spent a few hours snuggling quietly, whispering the thoughts that came to them. Though desire hung in the air neither acted on it. And thus, fully clothed in her nightwear, Hermione curled up with Harry on top of the covers while he conjured a throw. They stayed that way in companionable silence until falling asleep.

The morning dawned cool and gray as Harry woke to the irritating burn of his scar. He righted his spectacles, which had slipped off his nose to hang around his chin at some point in the night. Crookshanks meowed loudly while Harry blinked owlishly at the orange Kneazle. The cat yowled again and Harry yawned.

“Good morning to you too, you mangy cat. How did you get here?”

Crookshanks batted at his face. Harry glared at him, glad that the claws had been retracted and not splayed. Crookshanks hissed, looking pleased with himself. Harry flicked his hand, banishing the Kneazle onto the floor, where he yowled in protest.

“What are you doing to my cat?” Hermione murmured, running her hand up his chest and peering blearily over his shoulder.

“Saving his life,” Harry replied, grabbing his wand and tossing a silencing charm on the orange vocal atrocity.

“He’s probably just hungry,” she said calmly, leaning away from him briefly to locate her wand. A couple of flicks and a few words had munchies dumping themselves into the cat bowl that suddenly appeared by the room’s desk.

Crookshanks eyed him angrily, his yellow eyes promising future vengeance.

“Yes, yes, I know,” Harry grumbled at the cat. “Death and mayhem and all things orange.”

“What are you going on about, Harry?” Hermione asked, sitting up appearing more awake. “Wait a minute, how did Crookshanks get in here?”

“Ask him, he’ll never reveal his secrets to me,” Harry said, turning his back to the Kneazle.

“Hmm,” she hummed, setting her wand back on the nightstand and settling back against Harry.

Their feet touched and Harry chuckled. “Your feet are cold.”

“Like yours aren’t?” she teased, trailing kisses down his jaw line. “You’re scratchy,” she added wrinkling her nose, leaning over to kiss him gently on the mouth.

“Mmm,” he hummed softly, opening his mouth to her seeking tongue.

Hermione pressed herself against him, sweeping her tongue into his mouth. She explored, lingering in her favorite places. Harry settled deeper into the pillows, bringing his hands up to tangle sweetly in her hair.

She sighed into him, rubbing her fingers across his stubble as she deepened the kiss. Their tongues tangled together in sleek hot confusion. The kiss shifted to a different angle as she pressed herself harder against him.

His hands brushed down back where he noticed immediately she wasn’t wearing a bra beneath her pajamas. Without pause he slipped his fingers under her small tank and lifted it up. Hermione kissed him again fiercely before breaking it to raise her arms over her head. With a flourish her tee was removed and her perky breasts revealed.

They brushed lightly against his chest, rubbing against the soft fabric of his undershirt. Harry cupped them, caressing the tips until they pebbled hard against his hand. Hermione moaned ardently arching her neck back. He bent up and kissed the warm curve of her exposed throat while pinching her nipples between the pads of his fingers.

“I want you, Harry,” Hermione declared huskily. “Make love to me.”

Groaning, Harry felt all the blood rush out of his brain. He was so hard, his head swam in a muddled mess. One clear thought pulsed through him, echoing in every corner of his body; he had to fuck her--now.

"Gladly," he grunted.

As if drugged, he brushed his lips down the column of her throat to nuzzle the soft heated flesh between his hands. Slowly, he pushed her onto her back, settling his hips between her outspread thighs. Her hair spilled around her head, framing her against the white of the pillows. She wet her lips nervously.

"Are you sure?" he asked, physically pained that she might say no.

Her eyes darkened as she sat up. "Never more sure in my entire life. I want you to be my first, Harry," she said, briskly divesting him of his undershirt.

Now they were nearly nude. He in his boxers, though they weren't doing him much good, and her in flannel bottoms. She dropped her hands into his lap, bravely grasping his exposed length.

"I want this inside me," she husked, running her thumb experimentally across his head.

He groaned at the devastating touch and batted her hands away. Faster than you could say 'snidget' he shucked off his boxers tossing them away from the bed. A loud howl of indignation accompanied their landing. Hermione giggled uncontrollably, but soon silenced when he dragged her forward into his lap. He brushed against the warm heat of her and her eyes grew round like saucers.

"What you do to me," he rumbled, kissing her once before coaxing her out of her bottoms and knickers. Grabbing his wand he cast a pregnancy protection charm, that fell between them with a soft hazy glow.

She smiled shyly while he stared at her in all her glory. She had bushy hair down there, he thought with amusement, letting the smile tugging at his lips take full form. Pushing her down, he followed until

he was nudging the hot damp entrance between her legs with his crown. His blood was on fire.

She sighed his name as he took a nipple in his mouth, sucking hard on the rigid peak. Her hands fluttered against the sheets before reversing and finding purchase on his hips. He thrust gently against her, searching her wet folds for his place. Reaching down, his hand collided with hers on his girth. The touch sent shivers down his spine, fogging his mind. He bumped against her, coating the head of his cock with her wetness. Together they fumbled until with the help of her angled hips he slid partway into her slick valley.

Inching back a little, he reversed and plunged further inside her. She gasped at the feeling then with nerves when the second thrust brought him to her last barrier. He winced as her nails bit into him, leaving crescent moons on his upper thighs.

“Harry--” she whispered, quivering.

He brought a hand to her chin, lifting it until she met his eyes. “Easy luv,” he murmured, stroking his thumb across her bottom lip.

Leaning over, he kissed her, stroking her tongue with his own. He thought he’d burst while waiting, but gradually her grip on him eased until at last the tension left her. Swiftly he thrust forward claiming her as his. A muffled sob escaped her into him as he caught it with his mouth.

“Shh,” he quieted, breaking the kiss.

He trailed his lips up either side of her face, catching her twin tears. Small soft kisses were placed on either trembling eyelid before he reclaimed her mouth with a searing kiss. He lavished her with them, caressing her like she was spun glass. When she was ready for him, he eased backward and edged forward, repeating himself.

He brought his fingers to her clit, rubbing the small bundle of nerves. Hermione let out a keening wail as he spiked her arousal. She arched into him, bringing her hips up to his and he glided in deeper. At first it was awkward, they were off, meeting each other with mismatched

thrusts and jumbled fingers, but soon they slipped into a groove, matching each other in a sloppy steady rhythm.

The tempo between them increased with a grunt. Bracing himself on his elbow, Harry drove forward, bringing his hips crashing against her. Sweat drizzled down his back, dripped from his hair falling onto her glistening breasts. He watched them bob with every push of his hips, their motion filling his vision. His throat was parched, and his fingers were tired, but he kept going.

Her hands ran over her belly as she closed her eyes, reaching up to cup her breasts. She focused intently on her nipples, rolling and plucking them. Harry moaned gruffly, snatching one with his mouth, swirling his tongue around the pebbled peak leaving it shiny when he let go.

Her breaths quickened beneath him and he pounded harder. Her clit stood at attention beneath his questing fingers. He pinched it roughly and she cried out, fluttering around him. He was dazed by the feeling, his control faltering beneath the onslaught of sensation. He felt his balls tighten as they slapped against her bum. Her sheath fluttered again as she wrapped her legs around his hips, locking him against her. She moaned now every time he filled her, until he swelled and came with a shout inside her in thick pearly jets.

He startled when her fingers found his over her soft sensitive flesh urging him to continue. Chastised by his inattention he picked up where he left off as his softening member slipped out drenching them in a rush of cum and moisture. With a flick of his nail she cried out. With another she came on a loud keening cry. He rubbed her through every wave and spike until at last she collapsed in a trembling pile of limbs.

Tired and shaking, Harry collapsed beside her as she let out a little laugh. Rolling onto his side, Harry propped himself up on his hand. A dazzling smile curled on Hermione's lips as she brushed back a dark sweaty lock off his forehead revealing his scar. Gently she pressed a kiss to its jagged form then drew back.

"That was amazing--you were amazing," she whispered.

“You were pretty fantastic yourself,” he returned, sliding a foot down her calf. “How are you feet feeling now?” he teased.

Crookshanks howled from the floorboards. Hermione groaned, dragging herself into a sitting position. She glared at her overgrown furball in warning. Harry watched as the half-Kneazle paced irritably a few times as if admonishing Hermione for her brash actions.

Hermione didn’t seem put off by the act at all and loudly scolded the furry beast. “Don’t you shake your bushy tail at me, Crookshanks. I won’t have it anymore. Harry is here to stay so you’ll have to learn to deal with it or else I’ll lock you in the girls’ toilet until the end of the year. Capiisce?” The little devil growled in rebuttal, swiping angrily at the bed sheets. “You play nice, Crooks or there’ll be consequences. Now shush or face the firing squad.”

“The what?” Harry interjected, looking confused. “Is that muggle?”

Hermione settled back against him, snuggling into the curve of his shoulder. “It is. It’s a method of execution, particularly in use for wartimes and rarely used outside of them.”

“Sounds beastly,” Harry commented, giving her a tiny peck on the lips. “They use firelegs right?”

“Arms,” she corrected. “Firearms.”

Harry chortled. “Like that’s any better; naming weapons after body parts.”

“Yes, well...” she murmured, stealing another kiss.

“Eep!” shrieked a flustered voice. “Swibby is sorry! Swibby is so sorry Mister Harry Potter, sir! Miss Granger, miss!”

Startled, Harry and Hermione sat up. Hermione pulled the sheets up to her chest in an attempt of modesty. She looked sexier because of it, Harry thought briefly before yanking his attention away from her and onto the house elf quailing by the door.

“How can we help you Swibby?” Harry asked, grabbing his boxers from the floor and pulling them on over his hips.

“I didnt know! I swear! Swibby would never--” the house elf explained, pulling his ears down with worry clearly written on his face.

“That’s quite all right,” Harry interjected soothingly. “Why are you here?”

Swibby wrung his hands together in distress, shuffling from one foot to another. “Master Dumbledore sent mes to get the both of yous.”

“Dumbledore?” Harry repeated, glancing back at Hermione. “When does he want to meet with us?”

Swibby calmed down when he realized that neither Harry nor Hermione were going to yell at him. He lowered his hands from their death-grip on his ears and stood up straighter. “Master Dumbledore wants to sees yous at the first available moment.”

Harry sighed and bade Swibby to leave them. The house elf did immediately. He yawned hugely and swung himself out of bed just as Hermione scrambled out from under the throw. He padded into the conjoining bath suite and turned on the shower heads with a simple spell and stepped into the running stream.

He took a fast shower, knowing Hermione would want to use it as well and quickly scrubbed down and got out. Just as he was stepping out and wrapping himself in a fluffy towel with the Hogwarts insignia, she ambled in clutching a wad of clothes.

He paused in towel drying his hair to look her over. At his lecherous grin she huffed in a very pleased way and put her clutch of items beside the sink. They shuffled around each other, stealing a few chaste kisses until they had reversed their positions. Harry quickly finished up his toiletry and rinsed away the tiny hairs he’d just charmed off his face down the sink.

“You take your time, Hermione,” he called to her as he left the room. “I’ll go on ahead and speak with the man first. You can join us when you’re ready.”

“All right,” she said, stepping into the shower and shutting the door. “Don’t have too much fun without me. I wouldn’t want you to get a full blast of reprimanding all by your lonesome.”

Harry chuckled, draping his towel on the bed and grabbing a set of freshly laundered robes and clothes that had appeared via silent house elves. Tugging them on, Harry was surprised to find that they fit him rather well. He quickly checked them for recent spells and found some alien spell residue that he could only chalk up to belonging to house elf magic. Intrigued, Harry decided he was going to have to coerce Swibby into revealing the incantation.

Crookshanks hissed at him as he walked by and Harry couldn’t help but to glower back. The orange menace subsided and Harry passed, exiting into the corridor. Harry found himself on the fourth floor next to a descending staircase. The corridor he was on was particularly short and to his left was a dead-end with a large ornate mirror hung haphazardly on the wall.

Ignoring the quirky décor Harry clattered down the steps three at a time. Patiently he waited for the moving staircase to acknowledge him and switch over connecting his perch to the third floor. He patted the railing in thanks and was on his way to the grand central stairway above the Great Hall.

Once again he found himself waiting for the stairs to change, as they first let a couple of third years pass before transferring to him. Another crossover and Harry was on the fifth floor somewhere near the Headmaster’s office. It would take a little looking around for it as it changed its exact location every few weeks, much like the classrooms did earlier in the year, but it was always on the east side of the fifth floor.

Harry found the gargoyle beset in its tower near the statue of Gregory the Smarmy. It was then that he realized that Swibby either forgot to give him the password or that the Headmaster purposefully hadn’t mentioned it to the house elf. In either case, Harry didn’t need it and simply spoke the command in Parseltongue for it to move aside. Like before, the gargoyle sprung aside with a bow letting him slip through.

His presence on the staircase had started it moving upward towards Dumbledore's office on the seventh floor. The slowly twisting stairs finally connected to the small ante chamber in front of the Headmaster's office. Harry strode over to the doors and knocked waiting for admittance.

"Come in Harry," Dumbledore called out and Harry pushed the heavy oak doors open.

"You wanted to see me Headmaster?" Harry asked respectfully, strolling in and claiming a seat in front of the thoroughly cluttered desk. He recalled the last two times he'd been in here this term and thought wryly that this meeting was rather anticlimactic in comparison.

Dumbledore steepled his fingers together and peered at him. "First, I want to thank you for your tip the other night. I should have listened to you despite the unconventional means in which you acquired the information. I see now that I was wrong about your involvement with Voldemort and can't express just how apologetic I am."

Harry raised an eyebrow skeptically, but said nothing. At his passive gesture, Dumbledore smiled and offered him a lemon drop, which Harry refused politely. A brief flicker of disappointment flitted across the Headmaster's before falling off as he moved on with business.

"I've asked your brother to meet with us in a few moments time, but before he arrives I was wondering if you could tell me where you learned some of the deflector spells you used last night."

"Books," Harry replied, looking a little confused. "Where else?"

"Nobody's trained you then?" Dumbledore pressed.

Harry shook his head, a little irritated by the Headmaster's round about ways. Didn't he ever get to the point? "I did, if that's what you're asking. As best I could anyway. There's not a lot of access to higher quality stuff especially when you don't have the money for it."

"You showed a remarkable aptitude last night."

“Thank you,” Harry said cautiously, searching the Headmaster for any signs of duplicity.

Dumbledore shuffled about a few papers and pulled out a folded piece of parchment. “I took the liberty this morning to pull your O.W.L. scores. You got an Outstanding in Defense, Charms, Potions, and Transfiguration and twelve in total, one for each subject. Quite extraordinary really. Few witches or wizards manage that and even fewer with perfect Outstandings across the board.”

“Just what are you aiming for Headmaster?” Harry inquired, brushing his bangs out of the way. “Are you going to offer me some kind of training gig with you like you have with Daniel? Do you want me to follow you around like a spineless poofster? Like a loveless puppy? What wasn’t clear last night to you? Bridges have been burned.”

“They can be rebuilt,” Dumbledore returned, setting aside the parchment. “All it takes is the right materials and a little bit of time.”

Harry snorted, flopping back against the chair. “All I’m looking for is my Hogwarts diploma and a few opportunities. I’ve worked hard to become self-sufficient; to be someone.”

Albus sighed heavily, idly picking up a quill and twirling it. “Will you at least afford me the possibility of changing your mind? You have heard of the Order, how could you not with both your parents in it. From our discussion yesterday it seems you’ve surmised the chief goal of that little group of mine, but you don’t know any specifics.”

Harry glanced out the window, taking in the quidditch pitch. The owlery stood a short distance from it and he wondered how Hedwig was doing. He hadn’t talk to her nearly as much as he should have, what with Serion. He closed his eyes; thinking about his friend wasn’t conducive right now. As he opened his eyes, Harry wondered how long this thing the muggles called heartfire or something akin was going to last.

“Harry?” the Headmaster intoned softly, seeing the desolate grief that flared in the boy’s gaze as he turned back to face him.

“Go on,” Harry said quietly, wishing Hermione was here already. He could use the quiet comfort of her hand in his.

“The Order is comprised of several important persons who wish to fight against Lord Voldemort in a way that the ministry can’t allow them to do. More than a bit illegal but still operating under the minister’s knowledge. Fudge quietly supports it with no active involvement other than to keep the Auror Department from sniffing at us.

“Together the group is more than the sum of its parts. Each person brings something to the table. You speak of opportunities, Harry. The real Alastor Moody for instance takes time out of his retirement to help train the incomers at the envy of several Aurors, who would surely jump through hoops to get such an opportunity.”

Harry perked up at this, leaning forward eagerly. It was still his fondest wish to join the most prestigious and elite law enforcement force in magical Britain. “I’m listening,” he said, trying hard not to sound the least bit interested in getting training from one of the top Aurors to ever go through the department.

“Others, who are the top in their field,” Dumbledore continued smoothly, eyes twinkling. “Offer fast paced apprentice positions, which are certifiable and are as good as any traditional apprentice practice’s certificates of conclusion. More sellable to future employers even.”

Harry frowned. “Seems too good to be true to offer to a few measly fresh Hogwarts graduates. Shouldn’t you be offering them to Cambridge or Eton magical alumni?”

“They aren’t in the thick of it, but you are Harry and you’re hardly just any Hogwarts student.”

“Could have fooled me,” Harry muttered under his breath, standing up and pacing the breadth of the Headmaster’s office, touching the odd silver instruments strewn about wimply-pimbly.

“You’ve faced Voldemort and lived to tell about it,” Dumbledore went on blithely.

Harry shook his head at a bookcase. "Several times," he muttered dryly, reading the nearest title *Ice Mice and Other Nice Candy Confections*.

"Your brother is meeting with several of the Order's members for special training. As Daniel's brother you will be a prime target for Lord Voldemort, so surely you can see that you would benefit from these sessions as well."

Harry turned back to the Headmaster and looked him straight in the eye. "I'm sorry, but no thank you."

Dumbledore frowned. "If you're certain, Harry?"

"Absolutely."

Dumbledore sighed and pluck a candy from the dish beside him, popping into his mouth. He sucked on it for a moment before declaring, "Well I won't make you, Harry, but--Do come in Daniel."

Harry, who hadn't heard a knock spun around just as the door opened and admitted his useless twin into the plush office. Daniel scowled at Harry's presence before ignoring him completely as he turned to the Headmaster.

"You wanted to see me, sir?"

"Yes," Dumbledore said, motioning towards one of the chairs. "Do sit down, Daniel, Harry."

Daniel took Harry's vacated seat, flaring out his robes as he did. Harry sat down without ceremony and stared unblinkingly at the Headmaster because otherwise he'd be glaring holes through Daniel's head.

"There was a bit of trouble last night at your parents' house, Daniel. Harry already knows all about it--"

"Death Eaters?" Daniel inserted, looking worried.

Dumbledore nodded. "The Order arrived in time to help James and Lily escape, but they are not without harm. Both are currently resting and awake down in the infirmary. Madam Pomfrey is expecting to release them to at-home care within the next three days. Your mother sooner than your father as he was hit by a rather nasty spell."

"Did we capture any of the bastards?" Daniel asked, his eyes hard.

"All but one," Dumbledore said, holding out his bowl of lemon drops to Daniel, who accepted and plunked it in his mouth. "And while the ending of last night's confrontation is a happy one, I'm sad to inform you both that you won't be able to go back home this holiday."

Daniel choked, spitting out his hard candy. "Wait--What?" he gasped. "Not go home? But I always go home!"

Harry rolled his eyes. Of course his brother went home, where else was he going to go to open up the mound of presents bestowed upon him by everyone and their mother in wizarding Britain? Harry on the other hand never went home, choosing to stay in Ravenclaw tower and read the holidays away. "Do you ever listen, Daniel?" Harry replied scathingly. "If Death Eaters can break through the Headmaster's warding on our house, it isn't safe to stay there."

"Nobody can break through Dumbledore's wards!" Daniel defended, jumping to his feet.

"If they're on one of the Gringott's warding teams, I don't see why not," Harry retorted at the same time Dumbledore said, "I'm afraid they did, Daniel. Alas even I am not infallible."

Daniel glanced back at the Headmaster flabbergasted. "Then what are we going to do? If your warding fails then the only place safe is Hogwarts!"

"There is one other place," Dumbledore replied slowly, glancing from Harry to Daniel. "Your Uncle Sirius' place; home of the Order."

Daniel sat back down with a thunk. "That dump?" he questioned. "You've got to be kidding me! There's no way I'm going to spend my winter hols in that rundown townhouse!"

“Oh, do shut up,” Harry drawled. “I’m sure the Headmaster doesn’t care about your delicate sensibilities.”

“Now, Harry, Daniel. It won’t be that bad. The Weasleys will be there. Your mother and Molly already have a plan on how to cheer up the old place and Sirius will be delighted to have everyone. It’s all set. When everybody goes home on the weekend you two will come here and Floo to Headquarters.”

Hermione knocked and entered quietly at Dumbledore’s beckoning. She took a seat next to him and he took her hand. She smiled at him beatifically before turning to face the Headmaster. Very anticlimactic indeed, Harry thought as the meeting was concluded swiftly and without much fuss.

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 23°«««°»»»°

Chapter 24

It was two days before Harry and Daniel would Floo to Headquarters and temporary Potter Home. In the excitement of the last couple of days Harry had forgotten about the second Animagus potion. Of course it couldn't all be blamed on Horcruxes, infirmary stays, battles with Voldemort, time traveling, and talks with Dumbledore. There was mind-blowing sex too. Luckily for him, the potion needed two days to sit for full potency.

Most exams were done by now, with the exception of the extra curricular classes. The remaining seventh year ones were Muggle Studies, Care of Magical Creatures, and Ancient Runes. That meant that Hermione was cramming for all three of them and had sequestered herself in the library for some peace and quiet. Harry, having fewer courses than his girlfriend, had taken time earlier to study for his exams, easily freeing time for the Animagus training now.

He had taken care to procure a rather large slab of meat from the kitchens as an apology to Oorjit for forgetting him. Harry wondered if the occamy would like to accompany him to Headquarters with him and Hedwig. Entering Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, Harry wished with sadness that Serion was alive to come along too. He was going to miss the dry humor and ceaseless taunts.

"Myrtle?" Harry called out, hissing at the sink to open before turning to look at the row of toilets.

There was a loud splashing noise and some strange gurgling before with a wail Moaning Myrtle flew out of the bowl and into the air above the cubicle. "You've been avoiding me," the girl ghost accused.

"No, I haven't," said Harry. "I've been unexpectedly busy."

"Did you miss me?" she demanded, swooping down on him. "I missed you!"

Harry laughed, backing away and walking over to the edge of the large open pipe. "It's good to see you Myrtle. The potion didn't sour did it?"

Myrtle brightened and fixed her glasses, attempting to blink down at him coyly. "Not as far as I could see. Your snake friend is a little antsy though."

Harry held up the meat with one hand. "I've brought Oorjit a rather large apology gift."

"You'll be finding out your Animagus form in a few minutes. Are you excited?" she asked, as he jumped down the pipe.

"What to you think?" he shouted, sliding down the several stories deep pipe.

He flew out of the pipe and landed on a strong cushioning charm with an oomph. Harry rolled onto his feet in time to avoid a cuffing from the irritated occamy. Myrtle floated down watching the scene unfold with an eager expression on her face.

§Thought you would leave me here all by myself did you?§ Oorjit hissed, flapping up into the air to gain height on Harry.

§I didn't forget you! Things just got busy!§ Harry called up to him, waving his bag in the air, the scent of freshly cooked meat wafting from it.

§Busy, he says, while I've been down here without anybody to converse with for days!§

§Calm down and--§ Oorjit plunged, striking Harry in the head with his tail. *§Damn it Oorjit! I brought you a slab of griffin meat from the kitchens.*

§Griffin meat! Ha! I saved your scaleless arse from drowning!§ Oorjit snarled, diving on Harry again.

§Stop. Oorjit, stop right now!§ Harry demanded, batting at the winged snake and only managing to land in a few good hits.

§You gangly-limbed ape!§ Oorjit insulted whacking Harry again. *§I'll show you!§*

Harry dodged the next attack from his occamy friend and when the flying snake wheeled around again to strike again, he caught him by the tail. It took two hands to hold the struggling snake still; Harry had to drop his bag to the ground or risk getting clipped in the face by a wing. After a few minutes struggling Oorjit sagged between Harry's fingers. Cautiously, he let the occamy go and Oorjit dropped to the floor, tilting his face to the side so that his large glittering eyes could watch Harry with contempt.

§Are you done being insulting?§ Harry prompted, breaking the temporary peace between them.

§Depends on whether or not you stop being a baboon.§

Harry rolled his eyes and placed the griffin meat on the floor next to the occamy. *§We would be here all day then. Now you should know that the fight with the Horcrux went better and worse than planned.§*

Oorjit cocked his head. *§How so?§*

§The Horcrux is defeated, but Serion lost his life in the process.§ Harry said, sinking down onto the stone floor. He petted Oorjit on his head before sighing, *§I've buried him and said the words to see him into the great beyond.§*

§Serion was a good friend,§ Oorjit hissed sorrowfully, placing his head forlornly on top of the meat. *§He will be among the tall grasses now.§*

§With any luck,§ Harry agreed, raking his fingers through his hair in frustration. *§He shouldn't have died though!§*

Oorjit looked up sharply. *§Should or shouldn't, he rests there and to wish otherwise is a sin against him. Now, you must move on and wind your way through life without him.§*

Harry looked at the occamy thoughtfully and nodded. *§You're right. Serion would have my head if I didn't.§*

§Good,§ Oorjit replied firmly, ruffling his feathers.

Scrubbing his face, Harry let out a cheerless sigh and spun around.
§I have a bitter potion to swallow.§

§Animagus?§ Oorjit asked, lifting his head up and flicking his tongue out. *§I will watch.§*

Harry opened the second chamber and stepped through the portal. Oorjit and Myrtle followed him through to the other side. Immediately noticeable was the potion. It was glowing, illuminating the carved snake statues in an eerie blue light. Waves of light flickered against the surroundings creating ever changing patterns and shapes within the shadows.

“Is it supposed to glow?” Myrtle asked, floating towards it curiously.

“Well the Ashwinder eggs should have made the glow a scarlet red, similar to a roaring fire, but it’s a cool blue instead.”

“The doxy venom maybe?” she pondered, peering over the shimmering cauldron. “It looks like diamonds.”

“Diamonds?” Harry questioned, perplexed.

“Well liquid diamonds.”

Harry stepped up to the potion as Oorjit hovered aloft before setting down on the nearest snake head. Harry reached out to touch the potion. It coated the tips of his fingers like melted paraffin or beeswax. Slick and cool to the touch, Harry brought it up to his nose to smell it. Finding it odorless, he touched the tip of his finger to his tongue and discovered it was as tasteless as water.

“It will do,” he declared, standing up and briskly pulling his robes over his head.

“Been working out, Harry?” Myrtle flirted, batting her eyes behind her thick frames. She fanned her face. “You sure look gorgeous.”

Harry spared her a look of disbelief as he folded up the set and put it aside so it wouldn’t get ruined with the first transformation. He ignored Myrtle as she waxed poetic about his upper body; everything

from his broadening chest to his hairless back. Plucking his wand from his pants' pocket he silently conjured a water goblet and then set the wand on top of his robes. It wouldn't do to ruin that, either.

"And your collar bone is simply delicious..."

Harry shook his head at the girl ghost's lewd ramblings and filled his goblet with the viscous potion.

"And your--"

§Do tell her to be quiet. Her gabbing is making me want to vomit,§ Oorjit hissed, shooting Myrtle an annoyed glower.

§Just ignore her, that's what I do. Harry replied, swirling the cup a few times before lifting it up in salute. *§Well, here goes nothing. Bottoms up!§*

He threw back the brew and refilled his cup. The tastelessness of the potion made the texture harder to get over, but Harry persevered and swallowed another goblet of the stuff. He repeated the process until the elixir was gone. At the end, he let out a powerful burp which broke Myrtle's concentration on the various sexual fantasies that were his physical features.

It took a few moments before he felt bubbling start in his stomach. Harry touched his abs only to find an incredible coldness seeping through him from the inside. Convinced that this was a sign of the magical creature he was about to transform into, Harry started running a list of creatures that radiated coldness through his head. There were Dementors, Swedish Short-Snouts, Yetis, Artic Burrcats, and Russian Ice-Spikes. He was convinced that he would be a Swedish Short-Snout dragon or a Russian Ice-Spike sea serpent; both logical choices based on his Parseltongue ability.

The bubbling spread like liquid ice through him, tingling excitedly in the tips of his fingers and toes. Harry felt his face change shape; his skin thickening and stretching. The floor moved rapidly away from him while the colors around him changed as his eyes morphed into those of his Animagus' form, altering his perception of things. He found he didn't have the range of mobility with them that his own eyes

offered, but because he had worn his glasses, things were clear if odd-looking.

But before Harry could take a breath and get use to his new form the continuous bubbling contracted. He shrunk and changed rapidly until he was back to his old self. The change left him weak and dizzy. He felt dehydrated and licked his lips in an attempt to moisten them. Vestiges of the change remained though, Harry noticed, looking away from himself. A large skin was piled up near the knocked-over cauldron.

Myrtle drifted over to his skin and passed through it several times in her examination of it. Harry wanted to ask her what his Animagus form was but found his throat too parched to make much noise without rasping. He grabbed the conjured goblet and filled it with water from his wand. He drank until his mouth was no longer dry, he could feel the water making its way through his body.

"Myrtle," he started, standing up and walking towards the shimmering skin. "Did you get a clear look at what I was?"

Her head popped out of the crumpled skin and shook her head. "The transformation didn't last but a second. It was a blur of motion really."

"Damn," Harry muttered, touching the skin and finding it surprisingly moist.

"You are reptilian though it would seem."

Harry looked at her and said dryly, "No fooling."

§*You smelled like a snake*,§ Oorjit said, flapping over and settling down on Harry's shoulder.

§*Did you see the skin color?*§ Harry returned, breaking off a piece of the skin and examining it closer.

§Dull,§ Oorjit replied, cocking his head to better see the sloughed skin. §You were shedding the whole time because of rapid growth.§

§*Green, I think,*§ Harry said, flipping the skin over and examining it's underside.

"You've got red hair, Harry!" Myrtle exclaimed, coming up from behind.

"I have what?" Harry asked, running his hands through his hair.
"Where?"

"Here--" she said, poking her finger through his scalp. Harry edged away from the chilling touch and replaced it with his own hand. "It's like a stripe really."

"*Conjurus Vulbrica,*" Harry said quickly, conjuring a handheld mirror. He held it up to his face and saw that Myrtle was indeed correct. There was a medium-size strip of red hair above his scar.
"Unbelievable."

"It's rather dashing," Moaning Myrtle said with a hungry smile.
"Nobody would mistake you for your brother now."

"I've never read anything about this," Harry said, fingering the bright red hair. "Nowhere has it ever said that your Animagus form changes you. That's why I have to wear glasses to see when I transform."

Myrtle shrugged her shoulders. "I can't help you, Harry."

§*It could be because your form is magical,*§ Oorjit said, his tongue flicking against Harry's ear tickling it.

Harry looked at the young occamy. §*Let me see if I understand you. You're saying if I had changed into an snake-bird like you and changed back to my snake-human form that what--I would have a feathery back now?*§

§*Precisely.*§

Harry laughed. §*Then I am glad my Animagus form is not that of a snake-bird.*§

Oorjit bristled. §*And what is so wrong about being a snake-bird? Where do you think dragons come from?*§

§They're reptilian and distant snake cousins,§ Harry replied. §So while they speak the snake-language too they're very different from you.§

Oorjit snapped his jaws, aggravated. *§I am a noble snake-bird! You should want to be exactly like me!§*

Harry removed the occamy from his shoulder and held him aloft. *§Of course, being a snake-bird would be great,§* he said placating the riled snake. *§But seeing as I am not one, I'm grateful that the change only left me with a stripe of red hair.§*

§Yes,§ Oorjit said in a calmer tone. *§I see what you mean. If you were one of the dragons you might find yourself opening your mouth and spitting flame.§*

Harry nodded. *§Wouldn't that just be terrible,§* he added diplomatically.

§Indeed.§

Seeing that the argument had dissipated, Harry gathered all of the supplies from the potion kit. A few items needed to be preserved if they were going to last much longer. Household charms were applied to the cauldron to get it clean. It was off in the underground lake water getting its pewter scrubbed raw by a conjured brush while Harry wrapped up the piece of snake skin for further analysis.

Now that his first transformation was complete Harry had the arduous task of trying to force the change without the potion. The upcoming months would be as equally frustrating as they were exciting. Knowing his form would help considerably in the process, so he made plans to use his time at Headquarters wisely. The Black library would be a great asset since the lot of them had been in Slytherin for centuries minus Sirius and his ostracized cousin's family. There would surely be loads of books on snakes and magical serpents.

"I overheard from Peeves that you were going home this holiday," Myrtle said morosely, her flirtatious mood gone as she stared at the self-cleaning cauldron. "It's going to be lonely without you."

"There, there," Harry said putting the final shrunken items into his pocket and donning his shirt. "It's only a few weeks. I'll be back before you can say Nearly Headless Nick five times fast."

"But why are you going?" she asked, picking at a pimple. "Wouldn't you be better off here in the castle? Where will you practice the transformation? You're not exactly a small snake."

Harry summoned the pewter cauldron and canceled the conjuration of the scrub brush. "Dumbledore wants my brother and I to be there; for protection he says, but I know it's to keep a closer eye on us. Since the fight with Voldemort he's been acting odder than usual."

"That doesn't explain why you are--"

"Letting him take over my life?" Harry filled in wryly. "I have my reasons. I wanted to search the library for anything on Voldemort. Sirius' brother had been a Death Eater in his day. Now I want to use the library to study up on snakes and serpents. Maybe even spy on Daniel's training sessions. Hermione won't be here as she is traveling in India with her parents. I figure at Headquarters I'll have access to knowledge I've never seen before. Besides I'm sure there will be plenty of people there to keep me company."

"You wouldn't be lonely at Hogwarts either, Harry," Myrtle said, suddenly coy. She wrapped a braid around her finger and giggled. "You could always share my toilet."

Harry shouldered his pack and headed toward the entrance of the Chamber. "Thanks," he said, tripping the stairs and climbing up them. "But that isn't necessary."

"Well if you change your mind," Myrtle said, just as Oorjit flew through her. "Ooooh! You wretched creature!" she wailed distraughtly, flying off.

§Thanks,§ Harry said gratefully at the top of the stairs. He exited into the girls' bathroom and the sinks closed up around the pipes. *§Will you be joining me at Headquarters?§*

The occamy flapped around his head. *§Too stuffy, I shall stay here. See the forest.§*

§Well, if you're sure, Oorjit. Will I see you again?§

§I will meet you at the start of next term,§ Oorjit called, flying up the inset window and out into the open air.

Harry waved goodbye. *§Watch out for Hobday and Hagrid! It wouldn't do for you to get caught again!§*

Oorjit disappeared from sight and Harry left the bathroom. Out in the corridor Harry slipped amongst the students making his way back to the common room feeling elated and proud of himself. All around him was a bustle of movement as everyone hurried to get packed and finish up exams.

He'd find Hermione and distract her from studying and then when she berated him, offer to study with her for Ancient Runes. As Harry traversed the halls imagining just such a scene; an owl trailed him carrying a letter. It caught up with him when he turned the corner, hooting loudly.

"Hedwig?" Harry called, about facing. The owl collided with him, releasing a ton of feathers. "No, you're not Hedwig. Lost are you?"

The owl hooted indignantly, raising its black head and glaring at him with hard yellow eyes. It thrust a leg at him, shaking it irritably when Harry didn't immediately take the letter. Harry untied it and the owl took off, cuffing him in the head as it flew by.

Perplexed, Harry unfolded the letter and read its contents.

Mister Potter,

You have shown remarkable potential as a wizard; potential wasted in your brother's shadow. I offer you a chance to have your parents, indeed the world, recognize you. At my side you would be revered for who you are! Consider my proposal. I will contact you.

Lord Voldemort

Harry folded the letter, tapping it against his hand. This was certainly unexpected.

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 24°«««°»»»°

Chapter 25

On the first day of Hols Harry found himself waist deep in mad doxies, thanks to the Gryffindor duo complaining that he didn't have chores after Molly Weasley had woken them to do a little tidying up before Christmas that Saturday. For that reason Harry found himself sleepily pressed into duty de-doxying the curtains. The doxies weren't pleased at all with that idea and they made it perfectly clear when they swarmed Harry after the first spray.

Daniel and Ron weren't doing too well with their draperies either. In fact, to Harry they looked like they were losing the battle. Harry wiped the back of his forehead and wondered how Sirius did all of this without his built-in wizard slaves. Kreacher was utterly useless as far as house elves go. He not only had an aversion to cleaning it seemed but was pretty far around the bend too.

The mean spirited elf seemed to like him though and that's all that mattered. The elf brought him a cool drink when he was parched from all the doxycide in the air. Harry of course still checked for poison, but so far the elf hadn't done anything more nefarious than grumble discontentedly.

The adults were tackling a few other things around the house. Apparently Sirius had a chizpurfle infection in the guests' bathrooms. They were burning through Lily's patience at the same rate they ate her hair potions. Harry had a suspicion about how they got there in the first place as he watched Kreacher moan and yammer about 'filthy blood' throughout the day, but there was nothing to prove he had done anything.

Harry sprayed another batch of doxies in their faces, grateful for the protection his glasses offered him from overspray. There was no such thing as over kill when it came to applying doxycide to doxies. Their sharp tiny fingernails were killer. He had the scratches on his hands and face to prove it.

"Ow! Bloody menace!" Ron yelled, dropping his doxy spray to grapple with one of the venomous creatures. "Get off!"

Harry spared the redhead a glance, unable to look for long because the inhabitants of his drapery had banded together and were flying at him in formation, their black hairy bodies blurring against each other so that he couldn't get a lock on a single one. In desperation, Harry let loose with his spray, taking care to back up several paces while they flew through the poisonous storm.

Several dropped to the ground diminishing the group to only a few futile fliers. Harry grimaced and kept spraying, until the last three had dropped motionlessly to the ground. He flicked his hand at the little bodies and banished them into the rubbish sack near his brother.

Ron had beaten his doxy to death but the green tinge to his face told Harry he'd soon be in need of the antidote to the pest's noxious venom. Daniel was darting back over to the clothe covered sofas to grab it when the doxies from Ron's curtain let out a high pitched cheer and zoomed out in droves. Ron stumbled backwards and fell down with a yelp.

By then Daniel had returned and was spraying haphazardly at the zealous doxies. Ron was bitten twice more before Harry joined in and with great enthusiasm hosed the creatures off of Ron. The redhead reeked of the doxycide and his green face nearly turned puce before Daniel managed to unscrew the cap and pour liberal amounts of the antidote over the wounds.

"Oh man, you look bad," Daniel chortled as the color slowly returned to Ron's face. "I say the doxies won the round, mate."

"Says you," Ron groused indignantly, standing up. "I had the little blighters!"

"Sure you did," Harry retorted dryly, returning to his curtain for inspection. It hung limply and very damp.

"Who asked you, carrot top," Ron replied with a glower, eyeing Harry's red stripe as he picked up his spray.

"That cuts me," Harry said, thumping his chest, "right here." He rolled his eyes and turned his back on the two boys.

He shook the curtain, checking for any remaining doxies. Several fell down stunned or dead from the poison. Harry scooped them up and deposited them with the rest in the rubbish pile. Ron was giving him the evil eye, but Harry cheerfully ignored the Gryffindor and ran his hand mockingly through his hair as he said, "Well I'm all through."

"Your brother's a show off git," Ron grumbled loudly as he and Daniel resumed the perilous task of de-doxying the drapes.

"Sticks and stones, Weasel," Harry called back, shutting the door to the room.

If he was to be stuck with those two for the entire holidays, he was damn sure going to enjoy it. Getting a rise out of Ron was one way to do that, well at least until a better diversion came along. Perhaps he could work on his Occlumency skills for the time being. He still had trouble getting to the fleshy floor of his brain. He got to the falling point but without fail something would distract him at a crucial moment.

He passed a silent Molly who was carrying a plate of sandwiches and two chilled pumpkin juices. Harry paused, watching her bring the tray into the other room and heard Ron's whoop of delight. Sighing with disgust, he headed for the stairs and climbed down a level to the kitchen feeling a bit peckish himself.

Kreacher appeared silently before him at the base of the stairs and held aloft a cheese and tomato sandwich. Startled, Harry accepted it, only to be surprised again when a cup of Earl Gray tea was thrust upon him.

"Er... thank you, Kreacher," Harry said, retreating a few paces up the stairs.

"The snake boy is talking to me. Kreacher wonders how it feels to be the brother of the one who stopped the Dark Lord. Kreacher would kill brother if it was him."

Harry stopped his retreat and stared at the dirty house elf. "What do you know about me, Kreacher?"

"Snake boy is still talking to me," the elf muttered, slowly withdrawing back down the stairs. "What would the Mistress say if she knew that?" he paused to consider. "She would probably say that the book snake boy is looking for is with the binned because nasty blood traitor is thinning the best books from the Most Noble Black Library."

"Right, goodbye Kreacher," Harry said going back upstairs and detouring to the front door of Grimmauld Place.

In the hallway, between the troll leg umbrella stand and the thankfully quiet Mrs. Black, were several rubbish bags chuck full of dark artifacts that Lily and Molly were adamant about keeping out of the hands of their children. Sirius had readily agreed, having before been too unmotivated by the idea of the sheer amount of dark objects the house contained a statement Harry heartily agreed with. Why there were aggressive daggers, sinister music boxes, choking robes, werewolf claws, and ominous looking potions just amongst the binned.

Harry quickly located the newest bag filled with books from the Black library and sorted through them. Several titles on the dark arts looked interesting to Harry and he shrunk them, hiding them in his robes. Then he came to the one Kreacher was obviously referring to as it was written in Parseltongue. He held in his hand, *§Slippery Friends and Parselmouths by Celestial Gaunt.§* The author's last name put her in a long line of purebloods that Harry knew to be both the descendants of Salazar Slytherin and highly infamous for their ability to produce Parselmouths.

Harry secured the book and hurriedly climbed the stairs to his room to eat his lunch and ponder just how worried he should be that Kreacher knew about his Animagus form and being a Parselmouth. Was the house elf an enemy? If not an enemy could he even be trusted? He seemed to be helping him more than hindering him. But the old elf didn't like anybody, least of all muds, and he was at least half-mud. So the real question, he supposed, was to what end was Kreacher helping him?

He waved his wand over the food and let out a relieved sigh when it was as uncontaminated as all the rest of his meals had been. If he were to ask Hermione's opinion on the subject, it would probably

result in a one way detour into house elf and creature/being rights, something he was dead set against restarting. Besides even if he did want to speak with her on the subject, it would take nearly all break for Hedwig to fly to India and return not counting on weather conditions. Harry had no way of reaching the one person in the world he most wanted to talk to.

Going back to the matter at hand, Harry worried about Kreacher telling somebody about what he knew. Did he know more? Harry summoned the letter from Voldemort. It whizzed out of a dresser drawer; a few socks flying out behind the parchment and landing in a dejected lump on the floorboards. The letter appeared untouched, but appearances were deceiving. After all, he'd seen Kreacher sneak items from the rubbish when he first arrived and the elf always seemed to know where everything was within the binned piles in the downstairs hall.

The house elf was sneaky and didn't accept boundaries he didn't want. Ron had complained about Kreacher standing on top of his chest during the middle of the night, startling and waking him up. While amusing at the time, Harry hadn't thought of the ramifications of that statement. Mainly that Kreacher could and would come and go as he pleased, keeping his business secret.

"Vealo magical signature!" Harry said, tapping the letter twice.

Spidery lines emerged from the letters forming a black web of sinister magic that Harry could only attribute to Lord Voldemort's ink choice, if not the writer himself. Where Harry had touched the page the markings were green, a fact he confirmed by pressing his thumb in a corner. There were markings from the black owl's presence in gray blue and lastly blobs of yellow-green stood in the corners, a sign of a botched up attempt at removing magical residue, a particularly complex and archaic spell few knew, let alone bothered with. Harry attributed these blobs to Kreacher's inability to use wizard magic or failings with a found wand. In either case it did not look good to Harry.

"Blasted elf," Harry cursed as he slumped to the floor and started looking for loose floorboards. He couldn't keep the letter out anymore. It was too dangerous for it to be found. He found a board midway

beneath the bed and the wall and shredded his fingernails pulling it free. He slipped the letter into the space beneath and replaced the board.

A quick warding spell on the floorboard insured that its existence would remain undetected. Harry put more time and effort into warding the room from Kreacher after that. The ward magic came easily to Harry, it was like the patterns of the spells floated before him with crystal clarity, something that wouldn't have happened before he had connected with Bill Weasley during the Death Eater attack. Still, Harry had to refer to several old notebooks from his elective summer reading lists to find just one ward against house elves, which took most of the time since he would get reabsorbed in the reading material all over again.

He'd also taken precautions against the Weasley twins products like Extendable Ears and Spy Eye. The door received an imperturbable charm and twitchy-ears hex. The floor and walls were given an obscuro charm, in an attempt to block Mad-Eye's mad-eye. The outside walls were also reinforced with repelling and confundus spells.

Eventually though, it got done and Harry was fairly confident that the warding would ensure that at least Kreacher wouldn't be returning easily. Satisfied with the results, Harry sat down to eat his lunch. When he was done, he picked up the Occlumency book Hermione had found and read a few more chapters. The author was rather long winded but was good at breaking down points into easy to understand ideas.

After reading, Harry lay the book aside then relaxed onto the bed. He found that the best way for him to clear his mind was a simple combination of meditating and focusing on a single mundane object. The ceiling proved to be the most mundane thing in the entire room, which is why he used it.

He let his sharp mind drift and his vision to blur. Muffled buzzing started at the edge of his hearing and the hippogriff on the chest feeling soon followed. Harry rode the sensation until he cleared a sticky Droobles gum-like substance and began to freefall. He was determined to get to the fleshy floor this time. He was learning to

ignore the constant falling.; the first time had been very disconcerting and that had pulled him right back to the surface.

Ages seemed to go by as Harry lost track of time. He spent most of it staring at the inky blackness that loomed below his falling form. It didn't even register to him when a small shape appeared on the landscape. The shape began to distinguish itself rapidly from the rest of the miserable surroundings. It swallowed up the darkness, filling Harry's field of vision, until Harry blinked in surprise. The fleshy goal receded as Harry was hurtled up at an alarming speed.

He came to the surface with a groan. Muttering a curse at the archaic field, Harry sat upright and swung his legs over the bed. He'd been so close! The floor had been right there. If only he hadn't blinked or been surprised he might be there now building up stamina and readying his mind for stage two, defense building.

He took a shower, trying to clear his muddled mind in the process. Wrapping a towel around his waist, Harry brushed his teeth and combed his hair, knowing it was no good. Watching his hair spring up back into its unruly mess of a mop, he had an idea. It would require a trip to Diagon Alley's barber for some hair tonic, but in the end his hair would be more manageable.

Harry dressed casually and went downstairs to see what the household was doing. James, Remus, and Sirius were going through the dining room, de-jinxing the poisoning goblets, biting China, and shocking silverware. Daniel and Ron were still working on cleaning out household pests like Mrs. Black when Molly cried out from another room. Lily rushed past him and skidded around the corner in her hurry to reach Mrs. Weasley. The others came racing after and Harry followed.

Mad-Eye Moody stumped up the stairs, barking out questions along the way. Harry peaked over the ex-auror's shoulder into the room and did a double take. Lying on the floor were perfectly preserved dead bodies of all people in the room plus the many redheaded Weasleys who weren't. Ron was spluttering ineffectually, his freckles standing out on his white face. Arthur pushed into the room, bumping into

Harry as he did so. Molly wailed anew, throwing herself into his arms and sobbing.

Lupin took care of the boggart while the others comforted Mrs. Weasley. Harry watched with interest to see the bodies turn into a moon with a whirl of color. The shape shifter's true form was unknown to everyone in the wizarding world. It was a secret many had tried to deduce without success. His attention turned to Moody and Harry wondered briefly if the ex-auror knew what the boggart looked like resting because of his crazy eye or if somehow the boggart knew on some sixth sense when it was being watched and transformed even without an apparent audience in view.

Lily guided Ron and Ginny away from their parents and led them downstairs. Daniel and Harry trailed behind, the former a little uncertain of what to say to offset the terrible realization that the adults were far from strong and secure, that the war was getting to them more than they let on and he wondered what that would mean for him. Daniel cast Harry an unreadable look, which Harry ignored wholeheartedly.

"Come on Ronald, Ginerva," Lily said gently. "Sit yourselves down and I'll make you a cup of cocoa."

Ginny nudged her brother into his chair and took the seat opposite him. Her red hair hung in front of her face, blocking her eyes from view. Daniel coughed tentatively and then slung himself down beside Ron, giving the redhead a firm shoulder squeeze of support.

"Your mum'll be okay, mate," Daniel said with as much conviction as he could muster.

Harry went to grab glasses from the cupboards for the cocoa and took down ten, one for every person in the house. Lily came by with the pot of hot chocolate and filled them up with the savory liquid. She brought four to the table and sat down, keeping one for herself and handing the other three to the three teens before her. Harry took his and waved his wand over the lip of the cup creating a fountain of mini-marshmallows. Another wave and the fountain cut off.

Blowing on his chocolate, Harry stepped off to the side and pressed his back against the countertop. The three faithful Marauders traipsed into the kitchen a few moments later and made a beeline for the cups to the left of Harry. Remus seemed to enjoy his the most and relished the first sip with a gusty sigh.

"I never liked boggarts," the werewolf said, taking another calming sip. "I always get the heebie-jeebies around them."

"Never bothered me," Sirius replied, swallowing a gulp of chocolate.

"Oh right," James said, whacking his best friend on the head. "That's because you're fearless."

"I am!" Sirius replied indignantly.

"He is!" Remus retorted with a smirk. "Just ask him."

"Thank you Moony old chap," Sirius started, before looking between James and Remus and taking in their identical smiles. "Hey! Hold on a second, just what are you grinning about you two?"

"Nothing," James said.

Remus echoed with a, "Nothing, Padfoot."

"Liars!" Sirius shouted before rounding on James and waving his wand.

James' hair turned lime green and grew down to his ankles. His appearance caused everybody in the kitchen to burst out laughing. He saw Sirius raise his wand again and hastily held up his hands. "Now wait one bloody second!"

"Yes?"

"Why me? Why do I get green hair and not Remmy?"

"Oh, good point," Sirius said, casting the hex at Remus who didn't dodge in time.

James burst out laughing when Remus, the normally reserved one in the group turned into a Muggle-hugging Wizzy; forgetting for the moment that he looked the same. Ginny giggled into her cup of cocoa and Lily merely rolled her eyes at the Marauder's antics. Their methods for cheering up a depressing room was certainly over the top, but effective none the less.

James advanced on Sirius slowly drawing out his wand. "Now, Moony?" he asked, eyeing the other man as he too drew his wand.

Remus nodded, a wicked gleam in his eyes. "Now Prongs."

Sirius got blasted from both sides with Harry nearly avoiding a human-lobster transfiguration jinx. When the puffs of colored smoke dispersed, everybody could see just what happened to Sirius. He laid moaning pitifully on the ground in his dog-form, having turned into his Animagus form in an attempt to escape the curses aimed at him. It only partially succeeded since he still managed to have gotten hit. His hind quarters were glued together into a fish's tail, his fur was shorn off, and his front knees reversed so he couldn't move. He looked rather pathetic.

"You look great, Padfoot," Remus said, waving his wand and returning his hair to normal. "Spectacular really, wouldn't change a thing."

"Hey, how'd you reverse it?" James asked, gathering up as much of his hair as he could, so he wouldn't trip stepping over Sirius.

"That was wicked, Dad--Uncle Remus. Can you show Ron and I how to do that?"

"Yeah, we've been itching to hex Malfoy, the git."

"Boys!" Lily reprimanded sharply causing Ginny to laugh. "Leave Malfoy alone. Now we still have work to be done so hurry it up and finish your chocolate."

"But Mrs. P!" Ron protested. "We've been at it all day! Can't we go and take a fly?"

"Tomorrow perhaps," Lily conceded. "But not today. Ginny you will be helping Remus sort out the attic. Watch out for ghouls."

"Ghouls? No sweat, Mrs. P, we got one at home. Makes quite the racket at night sometimes."

Ron snorted. "No more than Fred and George did growing up. They had so many blasts and bangs and loud noises they could compete with the ghoul for volume and win."

"They did that to create all that merchandise," Ginny retorted. "How else could they have gotten that loan from Gringotts if they didn't prove to the goblins that they were mightily clever and already had a bunch of new products?"

"Moving on," Lily inserted effortlessly breaking into the siblings' conversation. "Daniel--Ron both of you will help Sirius with clearing out the bundimun rotting out the cellar. Sirius when they're done helping you, show them how to fix the foundations."

Sirius whined piteously, flopping his tail. Before Lily could demand he be returned to his normal state of being, James did so. Sirius cast a hurt look at both of his friends, but they ignored his pouting vestige with a practiced ease garnered from their Hogwarts' days.

"James, you and Moody will take care of that grandfather clock and try to tackle the Black Ancestry chart and Mrs. Black's portrait since the boys were unsuccessful earlier. Molly and I will get this kitchen in order and work on the upper floors in hopes to cheer the place up with some Christmas decorations."

Harry saw Daniel glance at him and merely raised his mug in salute. He knew what was going to happen next, it had already been played out this morning, only this time it would be Daniel petitioning their mum instead of Ron with his mother.

"And Harry? What's Harry going to do?" Daniel asked, turning back to Harry and smirking.

"Harry?" Lily asked, turning her head to look at him. He returned her gaze with renewed apathy.

At her continued blankness, Harry waved jauntily, if mockingly, and drained his cocoa of its dregs. He used his wand to levitate it to the sink. He let his mother's bafflement at his presence blow over him thanks to his newfound attitude towards the subject.

"Well he can clear out the cabinets of dark objects from the common room and office."

He nodded and left the kitchen, ascending to the ground floor and bypassing Mrs. Black's portrait while moving into the common room. It reeked of the doxycide from that morning, but Harry just shut the door and strode over to the cabinets lining either side of the fireplace.

He looked at the first one, noting the many layers of dust the has accumulated over the decades and conjured himself a pair of gloves. Dust bunnies, the common name for the household magical pests known as haremities. At about the size of a thumbnail, the creatures were particularly vicious. They sunk their tiny fangs into any available skin, but particularly enjoyed latching onto hands and noses. Muggles and wizards alike sneeze multiple times upon encountering them, usually while trying to dislodge the blighters from the nasal passages.

With his wand held firmly in his right hand, Harry flung open the first cabinet. The haremities mobilized immediately and flung themselves into the air. He cast an immobility spell which did nothing much to his astonishment. Three managed to land on his gloved hands. He killed them and simultaneously tossed a standard deviation of the common hindrance spell. About half of the haremities slowed down while the others appeared to be immune. He hastily threw up a bubble charm protecting his face and giving himself fresh air devoid of the pests.

Harry took a deep breath and started flinging out stunning hexes and cutting hexes. Those hit with the cutting hex died instantly while the stunned fell to the floor, where he promptly stomped them to death. Some landed on his hands from time to time and he'd have to stop throwing curses to get rid of the haremities. His gloves were getting shredded around his fingertips and knuckles. The tiny fangs biting into his skin were leaving behind painful bumps.

When the air finally cleared of the vicious hoard of dust bunnies, Harry was relieved. He banished the bodies into the leftover doxy

rubbish sack from Ron and Daniel's curtains and shut the cabinet doors. He removed the gloves and took stock of his hands. Bumps covered his knuckles and he was sorely grateful that their bites were not poisonous like the doxies were or he'd be in a right mess; as it was he was going to have to brew essence of murtlap.

Harry conjured another pair of gloves, hoping the fresh set would keep his hands in better shape. He strengthened the bubble-head charm and opened the last cabinet on the other side of the fireplace. Dust bunnies exploded outwards, filling the air in spiraling pandemonium. These haremies sensing the loss of their brethren were more determined than the other group to eat him alive. They attacked his gloves, his shirt, and his pants.

Stunners were less effective on this bunch and it cost him the skin on his elbows and knees. Just as it looked like there were going to get the upper hand Kreacher appeared and snapped his fingers. Harry ended up casting an impedimenta on the old elf. Kreacher flew backwards into the first open cabinet with a resounding crash.

Harry cancelled the bubble charm. "Merlin's beard! Kreacher I didn't see you." He held out his hand to help the house elf up and out of the mess of objects lying on the floor.

"Mistress would rather they be broken by Kreacher than gotten rid of by her blood traitor son. If she knew, if my poor mistress knew about the filth he's let into this noble house..."

"Right," Harry interrupted. "Well I'm sorry for hitting you with a spell and thanks for the help."

"Kreacher wonders if snake boy read the special book, but no matter, Kreacher is here to help snake boy with the cleaning of the cabinets."

"Sirius doesn't like you helping out," Harry said, peeling off the torn tatters of his second pair of gloves.

"He is an improper master, wanting to get rid of priceless precious heirlooms!" Kreacher exclaimed, looking flustered, if bright green cheeks were an indication of flushing in house elves.

"If you actually help and don't steal, I'll let you help," Harry offered, staring hard at the top of the elf's bowed head.

"Kreacher will do as snake boy says... for now."

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 25°«««°»»»°

Chapter 26

Harry and Kreacher spent the following day on the third floor, clearing out the four cabinets nestled between the common room and the swanky office. Fortunately, the annoying haremities were easily taken care of by a snap of the sour house elf's fingers, but Harry wasn't taking any chances and refused to part with his gloves. After brewing the Essence of Murtlap and fixing himself up, he really didn't want anymore bites, burns, bumps, bruises, hexes, curses, rashes, jinxes, or anything associated with the ownership of the questionable items he was sure to encounter.

Human and elf were both in the office and had already uncovered a plethora of dark objects from the first three cabinets. Harry binned the items he thought were useless or overwhelming sinister in a special bag for Sirius to look through later.

Currently, Kreacher was expressing his displeasure with him because Harry had stopped the elf when he had tried to take a golden locket from the office. The ensuing tussle over the jewelry piece had left both parties bruised, singed and nursing wounds. Harry had emerged victorious and secured the locket in a velvet pouch upon his person. He could only guess at the reason behind Kreacher's sudden kleptomania and speculated that the locket once belonged to the late Mrs. Black.

Harry shook his head to break his musings and continued sorting through the contents of the last cabinet. He found several fatally seductive objects, all with strong compulsion charms on them to woo somebody into their deadly embrace.

He'd been lucky to have gloves on when he brushed against a leather jewelry pouch that then tried to eat his hand. He was especially grateful he kept the gloves on when he couldn't stop himself from touching a large and brilliant sapphire that winked beguilingly at him from inside the leather pouch. The sapphire had confusion and bungling charms layered over every inch of it. Closer examination revealed that it also had a slow choking hex. The only warning signs would be the steadily increasing cough from the victim as they tried to get more air. Lucky, it required contact with skin to activate the hex.

Harry chucked them into the sack beside him and reached deeper into the dark recesses for the next object. He pulled out a torch. Harry stared at it, turning it over curiously. Why was such a Muggle item be here of all places? He waved his hand and set a scanning charm over the torch and watched as a list of diagnostics started flashing above it.

Kreacher distracted Harry when the elf sighed dramatically from his position ensconced within the first cabinet. He was cleaning the remaining knickknacks with a polishing rag by hand. Occasionally, he would stick his pig-snout nose out long enough to cast a baleful eye at Harry before sighing and muttering about how the nasty '*snake boy*' was helping the '*foul Master*' to destroy a '*noble*' family's history.

Harry ignored the aggravated house elf and returned to work sorting through the cluttered shelves. A snake ornament had a release mechanism under its jaw that pumped out undiluted bubotuber pus from the statue's fangs that dripped onto his hands and ate at his glove. With a curse Harry ripped off his glove and threw it toward the other side of the room.

"Is snake boy all right?" Kreacher wheezed, his big floppy ears waving wildly as he stuck his head out once again.

"Yeah, yeah," Harry muttered, nursing his hand. "Just a scare, that's all."

Kreacher shrunk back into the cabinet disgruntledly murmuring the whole way. Harry stood up, stretching and twisting to pop the kinks in his back and then dusting his pants as he headed to the door. He was tired of cleaning anyway and stifling a yawn, Harry rapped on the side of Kreacher's cabinet.

"Come now, Kreacher, it's time for a break. I'm going upstairs to read. You stay out of the rubbish and don't try to sneak anything either."

"Kreacher will go make snake boy his morning tea."

"Thank you," Harry said politely, then pointed his finger at the ceiling in a vague manner. "I'll be in the library."

Kreacher nodded and disappeared with a sharp crack similar to that of wizarding Apparition, while Harry left the office by foot. He climbed the stairs to the next floor and entered the library. He summoned the parseltongue book from his room, activating the magic recognition wards that had he been there to see, with a brief and colorful flare before the book came whizzing to him.

The cover of *§Slippery Friends and Parselmouths by Celestial Gaunt§* was dark green with a set of raised snakes in a slightly lighter shade of green with iridescent scales. He tried to lift the cover but it was stuck, stubbornly refusing to move. Harry examined the book closely looking for a trigger. There didn't seem to be a physical latch that he could manually release, so Harry tapped the book with his wand.

The grooves of the snakes lit up, light running along the length of their serpentine bodies until their eyes glowed like lit coals. It was mesmerizing. As he stared, the snakes seemed to shimmer slightly. Harry leaned closer for a better look. The snakes shivered and pulled up from the book cover causing Harry to jerk backwards in surprise.

§Master?§ the one of the left asked, looking up curiously.

§Hello,§ Harry replied as the one on the right hissed a warning to the one on the left. *§You're not very trusting are you?§*

§That elf tried to open us several times before, but we're under orders not to release the cover to anyone but our Master.§ the one on the right explained.

§Oglethorp, he speaks in Parseltongue, surely that is a sign.§

§Your integrity, Adæmus, astounds even me.§

Harry thumbed the edge of the cover contemplatively. *§The more snakes I meet, the more I come to realize that the genus as a whole has very dry humor. Why is that?§*

§It's a gift,§ Oglethorp deadpanned.

§Really?§ Harry asked with a raised eyebrow. *§Well it's not very unique now is it?§*

Adæmus let out a hissing laugh. *§He has Master's humor, but not Master's disposition.§*

§Who is your Master?§ Harry asked curiously, wondering if he could claim relations to the wizard and get passed the front cover.

§We are not allowed to tell--§ Oglethorp stated imperiously.

§But you look like a bright lad,§ Adæmus broke in, *§I am sure you can riddle it out.§*

Harry blinked then guessed, *§Tom Riddle?§*

Adæmus squirmed delightedly, while Oglethorp attempted to bite him in annoyance. *§Good job, you slithering idiot,§* Oglethorp hissed.

§If Voldemort is your Master, how did you end up here in the Black house?§

§Ah,§ Adæmus started, moving out of Oglethorp's range of attack. *§You see, we were stolen by that Regulus fellow.§*

Oglethorp apparently catching on to what Harry had said last, stopped trying to bite Adæmus and looked up sharply at Harry. *§You know Master's chosen name?§*

§He told me,§ Harry replied, remembering his second year in the Chamber. *§We were in the Chamber.§*

§The Chamber?§ Adæmus asked excitedly, twisting his leather body around. *§Oglethorp, don't you think we could let him in? He has proven he knows Tom and he can speaks the snake language.§*

Oglethorp sighed exasperatedly, but dipped his head affirmatively. *§Fine, fine. Just say 'relacoopido' in Latin.§*

§Thanks,§ Harry said, stroking the crest of the right snake while reverting to human tongue. "Relacoopido," he said with authority.

Adæmus hissed goodbye as the cover opened, and Harry stared open-mouthed at the book before him. The text appeared to slither into shape, changing from snake-like scribbles into legible writing. As Harry flipped through the book, he noted that the pages were bordered with elaborate gold-leaves of magical and mundane snakes, twisting and twining around the edges. The illustrations were rendered by a very skilled hand, with minute details garnishing each moving picture that could only have come from personal observation.

Harry turned back to the introduction of the book. In gliding script, Celestial Gaunt explained what the book was about, who its target audience was, and why she wrote it. Gaunt explained her lineage, chronicling her biological and magical connection to the Hogwarts founder Salazar Slytherin.

Afterwards she emphasized that the anecdotal references within the pages were family stories passed down by word of mouth, until now. Therefore, she couldn't verify everything in the book and some information was more myth than fact. He particularly enjoyed her tale about how Parselmouths came about, which he assumed was a myth.

He laughed at her witty humor, light and airy but equally quirky. She was not at all dark minded or brooding like he'd come to expect. Celestial was a bright and cheerful girl, young and proud. When she got to the meat of her subject, she was downright captivating. As he read, she unfolded before him a world of knowledge directly correlating to Parselmouths.

Fascinated, Harry didn't register Kreacher's comings or goings, nor even the food he left behind. He read the entire evening away, until Kreacher came again with candles; as they died, their flickering and sputtering light finally alerted him to the passage of time. Reluctantly, Harry closed the book and blew out the candles, all the while wishing they'd been everlasting.

He went to his room, treading the stairs quietly. At the landing to his floor, he heard the loud and fitful snores of Ron come through the first door and was glad Daniel was bunking with the redhead and not him. Harry didn't think he could stand seven years with that and not strangle the boy.

Slipping into his room, Harry placed the book on his nightstand and strode to the closed window. Peering outside, Harry scanned the sky for signs of Hedwig. He couldn't see her, and figured she was still out hunting and would return at some point in the night. He pushed the window open and made sure there was fresh water in her bowl and a few owl treats in her cage incase her hunt was unsuccessful.

He changed into his bedclothes and climbed into bed. For a while he lay there, staring up at the ceiling, everything he had read running through his mind.

Parselmouths all had snakes animagus forms of some fashion or relation, such as dragons, who were cousins to a few magical genus. Though few Parselmouths recorded had a magical snake animagus form, it wasn't impossible, but it was considered extremely rare and a sign of greatness. Also not every Parselmouth could obtain this goal, because diluted blood (and here Harry knew Celestial was wrong, as it was power, not blood, that indicated success, after all, he was a half-blood) would negatively affect the snake-animagus attempts to reach his animal form.

She also theorized that their snake animagus forms that enabled them to speak with snakes, which deviated from the tradition of how Parselmouths came about that she had told in the beginning. She couldn't prove her theory, because she didn't know of any non-Parselmouth with a snake form. Harry however could counter the argument because as he saw it in order for her theory to be correct, the accomplished animagi witch or wizard would have to be able to speak with his or her animal in and out of that second form. If they could, Harry had never heard of it.

Celestial also wrote about snake familiars and how they were the most loyal of familiars, despite their slippery nature. Harry could see Serion in her companion, Worthy, a female cobra, who had a dry disposition but a stalwart nature. The uses she detailed for such familiars left Harry with a bad taste in his mouth, as it came across as taking advantage of the unwitting snake, but he could see the significance of acts when dealing with power rituals, mind magics, and potion ingredients, though he could never see himself using Serion for one of Snape's potions.

Turning over, Harry sighed and pulled the covers up; thoughts swirling softly in his mind, each tumbling around another until he drifted away into darkness. As his eyes shut, he heard the flutter of wings and a low comforting, hoot and then nothing. He fell into the warm embrace of sleep.

Wind blew across his face and Harry realized that he was in a freefall. The air buffeted around him, pushing him upwards while gravity pulled him down. The darkness seemed to go on and on forever, and thought it likely he would never slow down or stop. He wasn't sure he wanted to either, because stopping would be painful. Wouldn't it?

He saw a form take shape out of the darkness, distant and small. He wondered if that was ground. He was falling sideways, not down, like the wind suggested if the shape was ground and that was weird. Harry decided he must be dreaming, because nobody fell sideways like this.

The form grew in size, its gray-black color slowly morphing into a mushy pink red. At least it looked squishy. Harry relaxed and his body flew faster, hurtling itself toward the pink mass. Harry remained calm, because squishy things didn't hurt when you crashed into them.

The blackness was eaten up by the glistening pink floor--or wall he reminded himself, until it was all he could see. The wall became more detailed the closer he got; the small patterns he saw became hills and valleys, then bends and turns of red waters. It reminded him of something, but he couldn't say what.

Then without warning he hit the floating pink mass, landing hard on the surface. A loud squelching noise accompanied the impact and he cringed as he sunk into the mass. The breath knocked out of him, Harry rolled carefully over, massaging the bridge of his nose which took the brunt of the landing. Odd, Harry thought to himself, he should have gone through it.

Harry noted that the sky overhead was pitch black. The ground was emitting a faint white light, which was almost dancing around him. When he thought he could move, Harry carefully sat up and saw the world for what it was. It was not a strange dream-world that he had

been sure he'd been occupying. No, it was his brain. He had done it; somehow he'd managed to reach his destination point.

He had taken the first step to becoming an Occlumens. Elated, Harry stood up, carefully testing the ground below him to make sure it would hold his weight. It was springy. He bounced on the balls of his feet a few times before he was satisfied with its solidity.

"Well, now what?" Harry said aloud, his voice echoing faintly.

He shrugged and took a step forward, his shoes squelching loudly as he went. Harry soon came to a deep bisecting crevice and he looked around for a way to get across. Twisting from side to side, Harry noted the distinct lack of anything to help him cross; he frowned as he concluded he would have to jump.

A bright light flashed ahead of him, catching his eye. Harry whipped his head up and stared hard at the area he thought it had come from. Nothing happened for a long while and when Harry was about to give up, it flashed again. There was no mistaking it, the light flashed brighter than the glow that suffused his brain around him. He decided he was going to investigate it, it was his brain after all, he had a right to know what was there.

Taking a few steps back Harry ran toward the crevice and with the bending of his knees, he jumped across. It was an exhilarating flight. He crashed onto the ground on the other side and heaved himself up. He took inventory of himself and finding everything in its place, headed off toward the mysterious glow.

What he found was what had been described as the magical center of his brain. When it wasn't emitting the bright glow that first attracted his attention, it was glowing in several shifting colors. Bending down, Harry reached out and touched the spongy section that was pulsating and found his hand slipping through. Surprised, Harry jerked back and stared at his hand. Slime dripped down his fingers in a steady trickle. He shook his hand and droplets hit the ground and were reabsorbed.

Firming his resolve, Harry pushed his fingers through the malleable material and it sucked his arm through. Then he found himself falling

through bumping and colliding with the walls of a giant spiraling slide. Finally, he went flying off the end and landed in a heap of slimy mess.

"Guh," he said elegantly, deciding to stay on the ground.

The light flashed again, nearly searing his retinas. Harry groaned loudly and threw an arm up in front of his face. After a moment it faded and he dropped his arm and cautiously opened his eyes. Dancing colored lights spotted his vision and it wasn't until he shook his head to clear it did he realize that they were actually there.

A blue spot landed on his arm, tickling the hairs there. It shimmered in welcome before flitting off to join the others. Harry looked around in awe at the amount of colored lights glittering all around the room, which was larger than it had appeared to be from the surface.

Harry cursed as the light flashed, blinding him again. He waited for the brilliance to fade before dropping his arm. Peeking around, Harry blinked rapidly as the glow of the spots danced and shimmered into focus.

"Show me what I must do," Harry called, beseeching them.

A door flickered into existence and Harry approached it. Several bright green lights flittered into it and he followed them in circumspectly. Passing an invisible threshold on the other side triggered the door's release and the door shut behind him, leaving Harry bathed in a soft green glow.

Curious, Harry edged forward to what appeared to be the source of the glow and watched it. The green glow flared as Harry reached out to touch it. Slowly it enclosed his hand and with wonder Harry let it swim over him. Wherever it touched him, it left a tingly happy feeling, as if it were eager to be with him.

When it covered his eyes, Harry saw for the first time that the room was not empty as it had appeared to be. He saw lightning strike the ground with dozens of bolts, the excess magic leaving that diffuse glow he had seen earlier.

"What is this?" he exhaled, eyes wide.

The answer was supplied by his mind. It was the sign of his animagus form.

"Are there other rooms?" he asked, feeling the form for the first time swell in him, testing the definition of his human body.

There was, he learned. Each filled with something new and thrilling. It was magic in its most elemental form.

"How do I access them?"

The response filled his thoughts in a dissatisfying way. He already had access and only power rituals could now improve his access to his magic. He grumbled under his breath.

"So what am I?" he finally asked, returning back to the original purpose of the room.

'You are death,' said a voice that wasn't part of his own thoughts.

Startled, Harry jerked around, searching for the speaker. "I am not death," he answered affronted.

'You will soon realize it,' the voice replied. 'Practice your form. You will need it in the coming months. Be wary of the great wizard, and follow the red lights to the memories, you must protect from the evil one. Next time you're here, they will show you the way.'

"Wait, what?" Harry said, as the room started to dissolve. "What--"

Harry reached out and grabbed at the air and his hand hit something. He jerked his hand back and opened his eyes. His hand still smarted from the wall and as he sat nursing it, he glanced around the room.

The furnishings in the bedroom at Grimmauld Place greeted him. Hedwig hooted a throaty good morning from her spot on top of his dresser and he yawned. He mumbled a response back and stretched, working out the kinks in his body.

He realized his head hurt a little as he attempted to sit up and get out of bed. Groaning he flopped backwards and flung his arm over his

eyes. Hedwig fluttered down from her perch, her light weight barely depressing the mattress as she side-walked to him.

Opening his eyes, Harry smiled in contentment. He scratched under her beak, while she warbled softly. Hedwig leaned into his touch and closed her eyes. He continued petting her until she tired of it and flew off.

"Five more minutes," he told her tiredly, turning his head back towards his pillows. She hooted in gentle reprimand but only shuffled her feathers quietly as she settled in for another bout of sleep. As he closed his eyes, Harry missed the widening of Hedwig's yellow eyes as his own flared an intensely brilliant green.

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 26°«««°»»»°

Chapter 27

Christmas Eve at Grimmauld Place was a sight to behold. Molly and Lily were directing the Marauders in decoration placement. Remus, being the least cowed by the fiery redheads, managed to wrap both Sirius and James in the holly boughs meant for the banisters. Lily, of course, blamed the other two idiots for fooling around. Their glares promised Remus some serious retribution before the day was done.

The rest of the Weasley clan was showing up throughout the day. First, the twins came in with a flash and bang startling Kreacher so badly that he fell backwards into the fireplace and needed putting out. Harry made sure the house elf was doing all right before telling him to take a small rest.

Bill and Charlie arrived sometime after lunch, just missing the spectacle that had been Sirius and James animating the gingerbread men to attack Remus. Ron was torn between being put out at the demise of the cookies and laughter at the sight of the werewolf prancing around the kitchen making squeaking noises of terror as the little cookies laid siege. In the end he just looked purple.

Percival was the last to arrive. Harry immediately disliked the pompous air red head put on as he stepped out of the Floo. Molly crushed the git in a death grip, sobbing into his cloak collar until Arthur had the good sense to remove her from the very pale son, whose freckles stood out starkly thanks to his mother's reaction.

Hedwig flew downstairs several times to see all the commotion for herself. She was currently resting on Harry's shoulder, nibbling on his ear and throwing reproving looks at the rest of them whenever she could. Harry was especially grateful for her company.

Ginny had grabbed the twins about an hour after Percy had shown up and was now holed up in the upstairs girls' bedroom that was emitting several loud noises and a fair share of bangs. Kreacher kept rubbing his backside and glaring up at the ceiling, muttering about those awful brats. One particularly colorful outburst caused Harry to laugh out loud, earning a glare from Ron who was helping Bill decorate the tree by stringing the popcorn garlands.

Daniel had run off to who knows where and Harry could only assume that Dumbledore or somebody had arrived to train the prick. He could have crept around trying to figure out what his brother was doing and with whom, but the fire was warm and bright. So he spent the day by the fire, reading Celestial Gaunt's book and learning more about being a Parselmouth.

Most of it was the history and the lore surrounding the magical talent. Some extinct snakes from several climates were described, their names passed down even into Muggle traditions. In the second portion, she briefly explained that Parseltongue could be used in cutting incantation-time in half, but found that this was only particularly useful in times of frustration and household upkeep. She then listed the word choices she'd used and the results for various tasks.

Harry found her spell casting methods primitive compared to what he had accomplished without any guidance. Celestial never mentioned if other Parselmouths could use it more effectively than she did. Particularly, he was worried that Voldemort knew how to do what he did with Parseltongue commands. Voldemort had to know he could cast some things because the book had been in his possession before Regulus stole it. It all depended on the faith Voldemort put in the witch's words and how much he experimented.

A hullabaloo broke out amongst the celebrating wizards as the tree was topped by a glittering fairy ornament that James had transfigured from a glass vase. Kreacher went puce with anger at the sight of his Mistress' favorite flower vase being used in such a Muggle tradition. Harry had to grab the house elf by the collar of his dirty pillowcase to stop him from taking action. Instead, he set the poor elf to making chocolate and bringing Harry a plate of Christmas biscuits.

Molly broke out her wireless and soon the voice of Myron Wagtail from Weird Sisters was filling the room. Lily and Arthur managed to create a spell that sent the sound throughout the house so that the holiday music could be heard by everyone. Following the Weird Sisters was Earl Lear singing *Holly Boughs*, then Lockjoint with *Old Muggle Nick*, and the Harebrained Centuars with *Nargles in the Mistletoe*.

Kreacher returned with Harry's snack and Harry accepted it gratefully. James and Sirius were making Bill and Charlie laugh with their antics, which included transforming Remus into an short artic-elf with pointy white ears and gray fur. Ron was calling up the stairs for Ginny to get down to see the disgruntled werewolf's latest fashion. Twin cracks of Apparation accompanied Fred and George's sudden appearance on top of their younger brother. He shouted at them to get off and struggled feebly under their weight, all the while turning redder.

Arthur shook his head at his children's antics and pulled his wife into a dance when her favorite singer came on the wireless. She blushed prettily and fussed with his sweater-collar before gliding into his arms. Looking at them, Harry wished Hermione was around for him to do the same with, perhaps even sneak off somewhere and snuggle.

Kreacher snorted disgustedly and disappeared with a loud pop. Harry sighed and ate a biscuit. Whatever Dumbledore had in mind for Harry this holiday wasn't working out. He was sure Dumbledore had wanted him to reconnect with his family and maybe train a little; anything to get him back under the thumb of authority, particularly one belonging to a crafty old wizard.

Harry closed his book and drank the rest of his chocolate in one gulp. The hot liquid coursed down his throat, filling his stomach with warmth. He had had enough of the cozy Christmas scene being played out before him. He was going to relocate to the library.

Harry got up and left the room easily skirting around those milling about by the tree. He jogged up the stairs with ease and was soon in front of the library. He reached his hand out to push the door open when a muffled shout came from behind it.

Pausing, Harry listened carefully for an indication of what was happening inside. He pressed his ear to the door and looked down at his shoes. He didn't have to wait long. There was another shout accompanied by a flash of spell fire under the door crack.

Was this his brother's training? Harry's heartbeat sped up and without hesitation he grabbed the doorknob and with a downward twist released the latch. He slipped through the crack and pressed his back against the door on the other side, being sure to keep himself

flat. He didn't know what to expect but seeing the stacks of shelves piled against one another with nearly no room to spare in front of him was not it. Harry couldn't see a thing through them.

Cautiously he slid along the wall to the right, edging around the room. The shouts became clearer as he edged around the book stacks, spell incantations reaching his ears from two different people. One was definitely being his brother and the other sounded a lot like Snape. Harry bit back a bark of laughter at the thought of his brother having to train with the Slytherin Head of House. They would be at each other's throats in the most comical of ways.

Light started to filter through the masses of books and a few more steps revealed exactly what was going on. Snape and Daniel were on opposite sides of the room surrounded by a dueling barrier, which kept stray spellfire from harming the structure of the room and the books. And people snooping, Harry thought as he peered at the two of them prancing around and casting a lot of spells.

Not surprisingly, Daniel was doing very well for himself. He was always good against a known enemy like Malfoy or Snape. They didn't frighten him like Voldemort did. The fear was smart on his twin's part, Harry decided.

In spite of Daniel's training Harry knew immediately by watching him that the brat didn't stand a chance in a non-regulated fight. Daniel wasn't innovative. He stuck to verbal incantations and relied on his power to see him through the match.

Snape, Harry saw, knew this and was wearing Daniel down on purpose, giving him the time to say the long incantations and letting the Gryffindor zealously overpower them. While Daniel was doing that Snape kept firing his own spells wide off the mark, enticing Daniel to tire himself out. Daniel was smug, thinking he had the upper hand, and Harry could just imagine the verbal lashing Snape was going to give him at the end of this when Daniel was magically drained and physically tired.

"*Lacerates Inimicus!*" shouted Daniel, jabbing his wand forward with a triumphant gleam.

Snape knocked the spell away and sent back a silent hex, its only indicator, a brief flash of light when it first left the wand. Harry watched as the spell connected with his brother, flipping him up in the air and hurtling him backwards from the sheer force of impact. The potions professor stalked over to the motionless boy and he leaned over, grabbing Daniel's wand from his lax fingers, as his greasy hair fell in a curtain around his face.

"It would be advisable for you to start practicing before we meet up to continue these useless lessons of yours. I don't know what Dumbledore sees in you, because it's obvious that you lack talent, dedication and drive."

"Fuck you, slime ball," Daniel groaned, trying to sit up.

"Resorting to name calling?" Snape sneered, using his foot to push Daniel back onto the ground. "Losers do that because they have nothing else to fall back on. Your wandwork is shoddy, you're lazy and you're slow, and you use verbal incanting as a crutch. The Dark Lord could easily kill you."

Harry nodded in agreement from behind the stacks, watching as his brother's face turned red as his anger boiled just beneath the surface, or from a lack of air, quite possibly both.

"Hasn't happened yet," Daniel said sourly.

"Luck eventually runs out."

"At least I don't have to resort to dark arts to win a duel."

Snape pressed down harder, shoving his weight into the Gryffindor's chest. Daniel let out an *oomph* of distress. "I used a silent banishment spell on you, but then you should know that, seeing as you profess to be the best in your year at Defense Against the Dark Arts."

"Bastard," Daniel wheezed, trying to shove Snape off of him.

"If you are the only hope for the magical world, then it is doomed. The Dark Lord will put your head on a pike and start his crusade on the

muggles. The Order will be picked off like flies," said Snape, coldly. "Your mother and father will be kept alive for his or his Death Eaters amusement; they'll be paraded about in the most degrading way imaginable and I will be there to witness it. Your ineptitude will not drag me down, Potter, it will drag all those you care for into the bleakness of your own doing and they will curse your name."

"I knew you would betray us," Daniel shouted back finally shoving Snape off of him. "You're nothing but a filthy Death Eater."

Snape laughed bitterly. "I am a spy, you ingrate imbecile. You should know that any good spy fits into the group he's working against with ease and without suspicion."

"But you just said--"

"What I said," Snape interrupted, "was no less than that the Dark Lord trusts me and if you fail, I have a foot on the winning side."

"You scheming slippery--"

"Snake?" Snape inserted dryly, tossing Daniel back his wand. "Yes, and proud of it. Now shut up and gather your things. We're done here. I have to report to Dumbledore on what a waste of time this evening was and I'd rather get it over with quickly."

The potions professor waved his wand at the corner and the foundation rune of the ward vanished. Snape pocketed his wand and strode past where the ward had been. Harry scrambled back and pressed himself deep into the shadows, as Snape stalked by, his cloak billowing out behind him as if an invisible wind blew across it.

He paused by the library door. "Do be sure to make yourself useful and set the room back to sorts." Then he was gone.

Daniel conjured a glass vase and hurled it at the wall, watching in satisfaction as it shattered. He pulled from his pocket a wrapped object and swiftly unrolled the fabric revealing a mirror. He tapped it with his wand three times and spoke Ron's name into it.

"Dan?" Ron's voice called eagerly from the mirror. "Did you do it? Did you use that spell we found on Snape? What'd it do?"

"I tried," Daniel groused querulously, running a hand through his messy hair. "But the bloody git did something to knock it out of the way."

"Oh," Ron replied, sounding disappointed. "Well how'd you do then? Did you win?"

"Yeah, of course," Daniel lied. "He tried to tell me how You-Know-Who would kick my arse, but I showed him."

"Good for you. I wish I could have seen his face when you won. That would have been bloody fantastic."

"Yeah," said Daniel, uneasily, "You should have been there. Anyway Snape left in a snit and is making me set the library back in order. He's such a sore loser."

"That bastard."

"Yeah," replied Daniel. "I'll see you shortly."

"You do that," Ron said.

Daniel wrapped the mirror again and stuck it back into his pocket. He looked irritably around the room, before muttering, "Stupid, slimy git. I'm not inadequate. I'm a right side better than he is that's for sure."

Harry pulled himself from the corner as Daniel vanished the shards. "I wouldn't be too sure about that," he said, startling his twin.

"Harry!"

"It's good to know you still remember the names of your betters. How's training working out for you? Finding that you lack the skills necessary to perform another miracle? Cause that's what you'd need, a miracle, to so much as land a spell on Voldemort."

Daniel flinched at the name, though he hid it better than usual. Harry merely raised an eyebrow as he smirked. Daniel, lacking a retort, said instead, "Why did you change your hair?"

Harry laughed. "Because I finally decided that I didn't want to add to the Boy-Who-Lived's legacy. Nobody will ever mistake my actions for yours again."

Daniel shook his head and let out air. "I don't need you to be me anymore than I needed you to come to my rescue."

"Oh really?" Harry said with great inflection. He sidled past Daniel and laughed bitterly. "Somehow I think you would be dead without me."

"I'm not useless!"

Harry scoffed. "Of course you aren't, Dan, at least not completely. "

"You and Snape!"

Harry spun around, his eyes flashing dangerously. "Me and Snape what, exactly?"

Daniel scowled. "You're both alike. Both dark and--"

"Don't you dare finish that sentence," Harry growled, wand drawn and ready.

"You know I'm physically and magically drained from fighting the greasy bastard, it would hardly be fair."

"Why don't you go join your adoring fan club. I'm sure Ron'll love to hear about you whipping the pants off of Professor Snape."

"At least people love me," Daniel returned acerbically.

Harry turned to stone in an instant. Something on his face warned Daniel it was not the time to gloat in victory. Daniel scrambled backwards desperate to get out of the way. Harry stalked forward, closing in on Daniel, forcing the retreating boy into the wall. With

wicked glee, Harry noticed fresh beads of sweat pop out on his brother's face.

"And who's fault is that?" Harry demanded. "You deliberately diverted their attention at every opportunity and if that wasn't enough, you stole the glory in some twisted way to hold onto some ideal you built around that blasted Boy-Who-Lived title. That thing is all you have."

"You're just jealous," Daniel retorted nervously, taking a step back.

"I'm jealous," said Harry flatly, stepping back also. "Once, yeah, but never again. I'm better than you and we both know it. I won't be the pathetic forgotten twin to your daring heroic façade anymore. If I do something, I get credit for it, not you."

"Oh yeah, well..."

"Good luck trying to be me," Harry said interrupting him, turning to leave. He waved a hand and all the book shelves flew back into position. "It's a pretty tall order to fill."

Daniel laughed. "For a house elf."

Harry rolled his eyes and slipped out the door following Snape's actions and leaving Daniel to stew in the last mess Harry would clean up. He wandered down the hall and up the stairway at the end of it, making his way to the attic. He'd found out from listening in on Sirius and Molly interacting earlier that there was a hippogriff living there.

Surprising, because hippogriffs were notoriously claustrophobic. The continued good behavior was probably due to the large bags of dead rats; Molly berated Sirius for leaving around the place. Apparently she somehow always sat on them, much to her disgust and Sirius' amusement.

When he reached the top, Harry carefully pushed open the trapdoor in the ceiling and climbed through. Harry noticed right away that the attic was spacious. Not enough headroom though, he realized, standing up and finding the gap that existed from his head to the ceiling was too small for his hand.

Taking a slow look around, he spotted the hippogriff sitting in the far corner on top of a pile of moss and straw. The creature appeared happy enough, munching on a pair of rats. Its feathers were dark somber grey which made the coloring of his orange eyes exceptionally striking. .

Harry approached the hippogriff with respect, being sure not to blink even though his eyes were itching. The hippogriff looked up startled, and clicked its beak angrily. Harry paused then, taking a steep bow, keeping his eyes glued on the creature at all times.

A long time went by as the beast appraised him. His back was aching and a trickle of sweat was making its way down his spine. Harry was uncomfortable to say the least. He'd given up on the staring contest a while ago, as the animal had won. The hippogriff hadn't blinked once and Harry had soon lost count of his own uncontrollable flutters.

Eventually and stiffly, the hippogriff craned its neck and Harry exhaled in relief. Straightening, he stretched his back, cracking it in several places. He walked calmly to the hippogriff and waited until he was beside it to reach out and pet its neck feathers.

The beast was a little jumpy at first, but Harry soothed it with soft murmurs. He past a few minutes running his fingers through the layers of feathers, ruffling them before smoothing them back into place. The hippogriff started making crooning and clucking noises in the back of its throat. No, Harry mentally amended, his throat, peering down to check the creature's genitalia.

"What's your name, I wonder," Harry said quietly, stroking the beak of the male hippogriff.

The creature didn't answer, only craned his neck, pressing his beak into Harry's hand. Harry obliged him for several more minutes before stepping back and taking a seat beside the hippogriff.

He pulled out a shrunken object and waved his hand over it undoing the shrinking spell. The Parseltongue book enlarged to full in only a few seconds. He hissed hello to the two snakes on the cover before murmuring the spell to open the cover.

Flipping to the last page he had been reading, Harry continued reading the feminine script that was currently dipping into the lore of famous wizards and witches who were Parselmouths. Reading such a favorable bias put them in a good light, detailing their prowess and accomplishments; instead of berating them for being dark, Celestial praised their ability to overcome adversity and animosity to fulfill their dreams.

Of course that was a very Slytherin outtake, prizing ambition, but Harry didn't see the purpose in being recklessly ambitious. The blind struggle to be "leader" would only put an ambitious fool in the lap of somebody quite willing to extort them with promises of glory. The best of example of this being Lord Voldemort, and how he lured his followers to him. The purebloods, prejudice, inbred and impulsive, latched onto Voldemort's campaign against muggles and muggle-lovers without thinking.

Harry refused to do anything as stupid. He would not align himself with Voldemort needlessly. He had thought about the proposal, turning it over in his mind. The prize offered was something he had sought for his whole life; rising above his twin's glory, to be seen as Harry, a separate entity from his brother, but Harry would get it by his own worth, not piggybacking on the power of a wizard who would as soon kill him as look at him.

He turned the page to read on about the next wizard who's ambition was to be admired, if Gaunt had her way. On the left page was a picture of two snakes intertwined in a artful circular shape. Spiders created a border around the page and they appeared to be trying to flee to the other side. They couldn't quite manage it as when they hit the crease of the binding they were forced to turn back around. The emerald green ink used on the snakes shimmered off each of their scales. One had a red crest and the other did not. Below them was the caption: *The Basilisk: King and Queen of Snakes.*

Harry began looking at King Clarius' tale before doing a double take. Switching his attention back to the image, Harry goggled at the snakes. The male snake being the particular focus of his interest. Now that he was looking more closely, he noticed that the female had

intense yellow eyes that glowed brighter for a few moments every now and then while the male had the sharpest green for iris color.

His breath caught in his throat. Gently, if absently, he stroked the image of the male in awe. So this was it. This was the to be the culmination of his animagus training. He was a basilisk; a magical creature whose survival now rested firmly in the hands of wizards because females abandoned their clutches of eggs, leaving their young to die. If a wizard was lucky to find such a clutch he could hide the eggs among the chicken roosts until it was ready to be incubated beneath a toad for the rest of its gestation.

Harry laughed, his head falling back against the wall. He was a king among snakes! How could he have not seen it before? All the clues had been there right from the start of that first dreadful potion. The spiders' reactions to his presence, which he had attributed to a natural fright of humans, was actually caused by the awakening of the basilisk inside of him, their most hated of enemies.

The second potion should have tipped him off when the first one didn't. The coldness was natural to that of a reptile seeking heat. The size of the skin should have alerted him even more. He had fought a basilisk for Merlin's sake! He should have known! It had to have been the red stripe of hair he had acquired-- the crest of the male basilisk. That had confused him on many levels that he overlooked the obvious, even when it was staring him in the face.

And that voice in his mind told him he was death? He hadn't believed it! That was then though, he couldn't very well ignore it now could he? He was death, in the most ruthless of ways. A single glance of his gaze upon a living soul and, instantly, they were dead. Faster than a killing curse, if he thought on it. His glares, scowls, and glowers could actually kill now.

Suddenly, Harry was worried. If the crest could cross over into his human form, could the gaze somehow transfer too? What would that mean for him? Would he be able to control it or would he have to blind himself around people to protect them; to protect Hermione? How could he tell her about this? She would think he was a dark wizard!

Harry was startled out of his train of thought by a nudge from the hippogriff. He patted the beast calmly, despite the wild thoughts running through his head and marveled at his life with a kind of detached bemusement. How many wizards could claim at seventeen to be two-thirds of the way through training to be an animagus? How many animagi in the history of animagi transformations could lay claim to a magical creature let alone being king of a genus? How many Parselmouths could claim being the king of serpents, the basilisk? Maybe one in the lowest of odds.

He was unique, but not in a way most wizards would clap him on the back and brag heedlessly about. No, he was to be feared if this got out. It wasn't a question of whether proceeding worth it, it was, but more about the consequences he should expect. There were bound to be consequences that even he couldn't anticipate, like the hair, which would crop up.

"Harry?" came a voice, startling Harry so badly he jumped. "Harry," Professor Dumbledore called again, climbing fully into the room.

"Headmaster?" Harry said, clearing his throat. "What are you doing up here?"

"Looking for you, of course. What are you doing up here all by yourself? I would have thought you would be downstairs with your family."

Harry shrugged. "They seemed to have it covered."

"They would want you downstairs for more than decorating, my dear boy," Dumbledore chuckled, sweeping his beard over his shoulder and approaching the duo.

Harry shrugged again, running a hand through his hair and hiding the book beneath the straw nearest him as Dumbledore bowed to the hippogriff. "It was a little rambunctious," he said when the Headmaster looked up, eyes twinkling.

"Quite. I found it a little chaotic myself what with your father and Sirius competing against Fred and George for the best prank of the evening."

Harry watched the Headmaster stroke the underside of the hippogriff's beak. He waited for the headmaster to elaborate, saying nothing.

"I had to ask Kreacher where you were," Dumbledore stated inattentively, continuing to pet the grey beast. "Funny that your family and friends couldn't point out where you were. You shouldn't slip off like that Harry, people will worry."

Harry scoffed at that, wrapping his arms around his knees. Dumbledore glanced down at him frowning.

"People do worry," Dumbledore said, watching Harry.

"Then why are you here and not mum or dad?" Harry asked pointedly, meeting his gaze brashly before looking away.

Dumbledore grimaced. "Yes, well. We all would love it if you would come downstairs, Harry. After all this is the time of year for celebrating with family and loved ones."

"Fine," said Harry, standing up. "I'll go down."

Dumbledore beamed. "That's the spirit. Now why don't you tell me what you've been up to so far this holiday?"

Harry raised an eyebrow. "A bit of cleaning and reading," he said.

He walked in front of the Headmaster and headed down the trapdoor first. Dumbledore clambered down after him and followed him to the common room. Downstairs Harry joined the others, taking an eggnog proffered by Kreacher and proceeded to stand around and wait. Dumbledore had taken his eggnog with a splash of firewhiskey and currently fire was fizzing out of his ears.

With nothing to do, Harry sat down in the only empty chair in the room. At first he waited for somebody to come and chat with him in this farce of concern. When none came he merely snorted into his drink. While the others were laughing and partying he ignored what was going on around him, staring off into space, a tiny smile of pleasure on his face.

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 27°«««°»»»°

Chapter 28

Harry woke the next morning to find Hedwig was still gone and concluded that she had been unsuccessful at her hunting trip. He was surprised that she managed to get away when the window hadn't been open.

Despite the perplexing mystery of his snowy owl's great escape, Harry could not find it within himself to stay mad at her. Sure he hadn't been able to tell her about his discovery or what had happened between him and Daniel, which was disappointing, but all of that could easily wait until her return.

Besides if he was brutally honest with himself, he was jealous of her escape. He couldn't wait to leave and be back at Hogwarts and see Hermione again. Life at number twelve Grimmauld Place was dull and, frankly, even more disillusioning than his first seventeen years had been.

Even as he counted down the days until the holiday was over, Harry comforted himself by acknowledging that this would be the last time he saw his family, willingly or unwillingly, ever again. He was going to graduate from Hogwarts and venture out on his own into wizarding society.

He had hopes to scout a lofty apartment in downtown magical London, just a few blocks from Diagon Alley. The cushy job would come from years of hard work and several promotions; unless he landed a tryout for a league. His hopes of being a professional Quidditch player were nicely trampled on by Cornfoot but not necessarily over. He would have to work harder if that's what he still wanted.

Harry sighed and sat up, reminding himself that, his long term plans aside, he still had to make it through the rest of this holiday. His plans for the day were small, involving a little practicing on his own and reading his book. He wanted to try out a few of Snape's audible spells and perhaps locate the silent spells he had done one of the remaining books in the Black library. He also wanted to try his hand again at Occlumency, namely following those red lights and start work on his protections.

As Harry dressed, he glanced at the Parselmouth book on his nightstand, noting eagerly that he was nearly done with the large tome. He had retrieved it late last night or technically early this morning. Lucky for him, Dumbledore hadn't gone snooping when the wizard had made his departure around midnight last night.

But before he did any of those things, he was going to destroy Voldemort's note lest someone stumble across it. He'd reached his decision the other night about catching glory on the other wizard's robe-hems, and he knew he couldn't leave it around any longer. Harry didn't know how Voldemort would contact him or when, but keeping the evidence of the first contact was just plain dumb, especially now that he wasn't riddling out the undertones behind the gesture.

Harry crawled beneath the floorboards and released the wards guarding the letter. He had to dig around for it a little bit but eventually his hand hit it and he was able to pull it free. Little bits of dust, thankfully the nonmagical kind, floated up out of the hidey hole. Harry stared at the crinkled letter, smoothing out the paper as he reread Voldemort's offer.

It was crap, but at least it acknowledged what Dumbledore hadn't yet, at least not completely. Harry was powerful, more so than his brother and he was his own man. Of course Voldemort wanted to control him, to gather another weapon for his disposal, but not anymore so than Dumbledore for his little Order. Granted though, Voldemort's group was a little more nefarious. In taking Voldemort up he would only be trading one cage for another, just for the illusion of power and recognition when in the end he would be more of a puppet than before.

Harry fired off an *incendio* at the paper and watched with satisfaction as it burned. He banished the ashes and levered himself up off the floor. He went into the bathroom and brushed his teeth staring at his reflection all the while. His stripe of red hair taunted him with the knowledge of his gift but also his inability to pursue his form until he could access the Chamber. There was no way he could hide the largeness of his form in a house the size of Grimmauld Place. Harry put down his toothbrush and left his room.

He ventured down into the kitchens, skirting around the merry group involved with the intricacies of present exchange. The only present exchange he worried about was his own with Hermione. He still hadn't a clue what to do for her. He didn't have a lot of money and he wasn't sure what to make. He was also afraid that the magic wouldn't hold on a gift he might create for her. His only saving grace was that they had agreed to do the exchanging at the end of the holidays so he still had a week.

Harry hummed a little Christmas diddy as he strolled into the kitchen. Kreacher was sitting in his chair by the stove for once instead of bustling around. Harry waved hello and opened the icebox to grab a glass of the eggnog and some ingredients for a ham and cheese omelet. Kreacher watched him the entire time he was making his breakfast, making Harry uncomfortable.

"What is it Kreacher?"

"Snake boy's wards were tampered with last night before snake boy went to bed," the house elf said bluntly.

Harry paused with a bite of omelet half-way to his mouth. "Are you sure?"

Kreacher nodded. "Kreacher is sitting here against Mistress' wishes because nasty traitor of a son seeks to punish him."

"For what?"

"Kreacher caught stealing the sapphire snake boy found in office cabinets out of sack."

Harry looked at Kreacher thoughtfully. "Do you still have it?"

The old elf nodded, pointing to cupboard under the sink. Harry opened it and smelled disgusting amounts of mold, which on second look appeared to be growing over the damp dirty blankets that made up Kreacher's bed. The bed was located beneath a slightly leaking water tank, which explained the mold, but Harry didn't understand why Kreacher didn't patch it. Remembering the compulsion charms

and hexes layered all over the gem, Harry conjured a pair of gloves and put them on also kept the mold off his skin.

"Kreacher, why don't you patch the leak and clean your blankets?" Harry queried, echoing his thoughts as he shifted through the nest of moldy cloth for the sapphire.

"Kreacher has not been given permission by Mistress or nasty blood-traitor."

"Can you not ask?" Harry asked looking over his shoulder at the solemn elf.

Kreacher glared, crossing his arms in an affronted manner. "Kreacher is a proper house elf."

Harry could debate that one, considering the state of the house, which was still suffering from a decade of being unused. Still, he said nothing, and proceeded to shift around all the knickknacks until he found the sapphire. He pulled it free from deep within the crude nest and held it out on his palm. The jewel winked in the flickering light of the kitchen.

"It's heavier than I remember," he said, holding it aloft.

Kreacher watched Harry beadily, his snout-like nose turned up in a sneer. "Mistress told Kreacher to remove the feather-light charm. Kreacher did as told."

Harry nodded, weighing it in his hand. "Did Mrs. Black ask you to steal it in the first place?"

The elf nodded, his bat-like ears flapping wildly. "Mistress told Kreacher that snake boy would need it so Kreacher took it."

"Why would I need a cursed sapphire?"

Kreacher looked at him like he was stupid and Harry certainly felt dim-witted at the moment under the elf's scrutiny. "Snake boy will need cursed sapphire for monetary purposes as snake boy is without

means or funds. Mistress says curses can be removed. She will tell you how if you would meet with her."

"The portrait?"

"Kreacher tires of snake boy's brainless utterings."

"Excuse me," Harry said dryly, tucking the sapphire into his robe's pockets and picking up his omelet again.

He took a large bite of it and stared into the crackling fire. Kreacher wobbled back and forth slowly by the stove muttering to himself. Harry ignored him and thought furiously about the generosity of Mrs. Black's offer. He could buy Hermione a present if he could pawn the sapphire. He would meet with the painted lady if he could avoid eating humble pie in the presence of his girlfriend.

But what could a portrait want, he pondered. Perhaps she wanted to be removed from the wall and asking him would ensure she wasn't destroyed. Or maybe she wanted to divulge some scandalous family secret to use against his Uncle Sirius. Though if the latter were the case, why on earth would she tell him of all people?

Harry finished his omelet and cleared away the dishes. He waved a goodbye to Kreacher and headed back upstairs to find out. On the main floor of the house beyond the drawing and common rooms Harry found Mrs. Black's moth-eaten curtains. Carefully he pulled on the cord to open them, holding his wand aloft with a silencing charm ready to fire.

He met the steely glint of Walburga's angry eyes. Her messed up hair sneaking out from under her white woolen cap only added to the crazed look on her wizened face. She was so much older than Sirius is was hard to picture her as his mother and not as his grandmother with her yellowing skin looking like a muggle map.

In either case, the strain between mother and son could not get more intense than it already was. Sirius hated his mother with unholy relish and would joyfully go at it verbally with her to prove he was no longer under her thumb. The mutt especially liked to taunt her with the presence of his muddy and half-breed friends.

"You're the one they call Harry," Walburga said in a dry raspy voice. It was raspy, Harry decided because she was always screaming her lungs off. "Well boy, are you or are you not? I do not have the patience to deal with a town thickhead."

Harry scowled at her and muttered, "Aren't you pleasant."

"It is Christmas, I thought I should try," she responded, showing slightly pointed yellow teeth in a grimace of a smile.

"Kreacher told me you wanted to speak with me," he prompted impatiently when she didn't get started.

Walburga nodded. "Yes, I did ask my elf to direct you to me. Have you retrieved the sapphire?" Harry responded positively and she beamed horrifically. "Good. The nasty little elf might actually be worthy to be beheaded and mounted after all."

"I'm sure he'd be thrilled to hear that," Harry said, thinking of the elf's crazy keenness to be placed next to his mother Krittarr. "How do I remove the curses?"

She frowned down at him. "You certainly are an impatient lad. We'll get to that in a moment, first I would like to ask of you a little favor."

"What is it?"

She pursed her lips tight enough to hide the fact that she even had them. "You have to destroy it."

"Destroy what?" Harry asked curiously, pulling the curtains back all the way and exposing Walburga.

"The Dark Lord's Horcrux."

Taken aback, Harry stared at her agape. "What do you know about Voldemort's--" Walburga shrieked at him and he amended himself quickly, as he didn't want to draw attention to them, "You-Know-Who's Horcruxes?"

"I didn't know he had more than one," she whispered, her raspy voice laden with regret. "Reggie overheard part of a ritual that he didn't know. Reggie was a good boy, proper and obedient to a fault. He came to me, telling me everything he had heard and seen.

"At that point it was possible for Reggie to continue his service within the Dark Lord's ranks, undetected; no one would know what Reggie had seen. But I knew what it was. Parts of that ritual could not be fabricated or made similar to any other ritual. It was magic at its darkest.

"Making a Horcrux is not something done lightly. It requires sacrifice on two levels; the planned death of a human and a half of one's soul on the caster's part."

"Is it possible to make seven?" Harry inquired, his tone as soft and as solemn as painting's.

"I did not know it was possible to make two," she said, fat crocodile tears welling up in her eyes. "I told Reggie the importance of what the Dark Lord was doing and then foolishly poisoned his ears with the idea of gaining such leverage.

"My dearest Reggie took it to mean holding the Horcrux in our possession and using it gain control over the Dark Lord, his movements and his ever radical steps towards a pureblood nation. It was not that we didn't want it, no, it was more the vision he wielded was sickening. We would not bow before his feet as if he was as powerful as Merlin."

Harry watched two glistening opal tears fall down her cheeks. "So what happened next?"

"I agreed with Regulus' plan and he started sneaking around gathering information. Reggie tracked it down and found it. I went with him and helped him get through the Dark Lord's traps and he had plenty. The hardest task was poisoning my son with the potion of guilty conscience. Reggie believed so thoroughly that he had caused all the deaths of every one of Voldemort's victims that he reverted to a childlike state. I had to do it though!" she shouted at the end wildly.

"I know," Harry soothed, "I know."

"I had to do it!" Walburga said again madly. "The Horcrux was at the bottom of the basin and we couldn't get rid of the potion in any other way. Reggie volunteered because he thought he was young enough, fit enough, strong enough to take it, but he wasn't. He was still a baby. I should have drunk it, I was far from innocent. I knew things, did things, I wasn't proud of, but Reggie was pure."

"So he drank it until the basin was empty, but the price hardly seemed worth it anymore. When the locket appeared I snatched it up and quickly replaced it with a duplicate. Regulus was tired by then, the potion clouding his mind. He handed me a note to put in the duplicate. I don't know what it said." She paused, staring at the far wall.

"So Regulus drank the potion and you replaced the Horcrux with a fake, then what?" Harry pressed.

Walburga wrangled her hands, twisting them grotesquely as she recalled, "There were scores of them--infernals--coming out of the water. I can still see their hallow eyes and leering faces. Regulus couldn't do anything, he was shaking so bad, he kept moaning about their eyes haunting him and that he didn't mean to kill them, begging them not to kill him--to forgive him."

"I drove them off with fire and hurried us across the lake. We were trapped by the blood wards from the inside and I had to cut Reggie's arm to open them again. I could hear the shambling steps of the infernals following us, but I didn't spare a moment to look back. We raced across the threshold and the door disappeared. We were safe or so I thought."

"What happened to the Horcrux?" Harry asked when she didn't continue for several moments.

Her eyes were no longer hard like granite but soft and haunted as she turned them upon him. Harry fought the urge to shy away and waited for her to speak. Walburga's gaze unfocused, memories obviously flashing in her mind of the events that transpired.

"We got home with our prize safe and sound. Reggie was immediately put to bed while I began combing the library for the potions reference book to brew the antidote. Kreacher was enormously helpful, he cooked and cared for Reggie while I was brewing. Reggie wasn't getting better though, but thankfully he wasn't getting worse. Just when I thought he was starting to come out of the stupor the potion put him in, a pain shot up his arm from the Dark Mark.

"I begged him not to go but it was if he suddenly had a purpose again in life. He told me not to worry that he was going to present himself before the Dark Lord and everything would be fine. I told him to wait until the antidote had finished brewing but Reggie wouldn't wait. He said the Dark Lord grew angry when his call was ignored. His last words before he apparated away were that of vengeance. I don't think I cried so hard in my life..."

"So he met up with Vold-You-Know-Who and challenged him to a duel?"

"That is what Bellatrix said when she came to visit us not hours later. She was cold and hard-hearted, in a way I had never seen her be in front of family. She was frightening as she questioned myself and Orion--Reggie's father--on what could have caused such behavior. I didn't tell her the truth and she didn't test our words with a truth serum."

"I'm sorry," Harry said, surprised that he meant it.

Walburga nodded slowly, her woolen cap falling over one eye. She pushed it back up her head. "We tried to destroy the locket, but we failed. Even after all our research and hard work, we failed. First Orion and then me. I had to tell him about the Horcrux, he wanted to know why his son would do something so foolish as to challenge the Dark Lord.

"The library was built up for each attempt. Our first attempt was six months after Reggie's death. When Orion died in the process and the Horcrux remained unharmed, I was beside myself. Distraught perhaps, now that I think about, I was distraught. I died in eighty-five with the second attempt. That is why you must destroy it."

"The locket?" Harry asked, it finally dawning on him why Kreacher's behavior over the wretched jewelry was so fanatical.

"Yes, the one you found with Kreacher in the office. Who knows how it ended up there, but you don't question how magic behaves, you just accept it and move on."

"But if the two of you died trying to destroy it, why do you think I would try to destroy it? I like living thank you very much."

"Kreacher sensed the Dark Lord on you. You must be the one he tried to kill all those years ago. It is possible that you have a certain affinity for their destruction, being marked by him."

Harry let out a bark of laughter. "I see, well the locket is up in my room--"

"There is a spell you could cast on me to allow me to follow you into the empty portrait above your bed. I should like to watch."

Harry stared at her, the laughter falling from his face. "You're serious?"

"No, I'm his mother," Walburga said wryly. Harry groaned. "It's *tendora* with a circular wand wave and a flick in the direction of where you want the borders to expand; in this case toward your room."

Harry nodded and waved his wand. "*Tendora!*"

"Well done boy, you got that on your first try," Walburga said, sliding out of the portrait. "What are you waiting for?" her voiced echoed from down the hall. "Let's not wait for the grass to grow."

Harry followed the portrait up to his room and quickly entered. Knowing now to look for it, Harry felt a slight disturbance to the wards. They had been patched fairly well and only somebody with as much skill as Bill would have noticed it immediately. Harry wondered who could have done it because he was sure if it had been Dumbledore the patch would have been perfect and he wouldn't have been able to detect it at all.

Walburga was in the blank portrait above his bed. She had a crazed gleam in her eyes as she looked down upon him. Harry went over to his desk and pushed aside the papers from homework. He found some broken quill nibs and frowning, Harry flipped back through the papers and then opened the desk drawer. Searching the contents showed nothing and he grew worried.

It was possible whoever had broken through the wards had found the Horcrux and had taken it with them. Or maybe they knocked it off the desk, he thought suddenly, bending down to look around for it.

"You misplaced it!" Walburga screeched angrily. "You idiot boy! How daft could you be!"

"Shut up!" Harry shouted back, "You're not helping. Kreacher said somebody broke through my wards. It is possible that they took it."

"You must have left it in plain sight. Have you no sense of security?"

"*Accio* locket!" Harry muttered, flicking his wand. A disjointed *phluff* sound signaled it was too far away to be summoned, which meant it could be anywhere outside the house and grounds. "Damn it," he swore.

"Kreacher! Kreacher! Come here!" Sirius' mother shrieked, waving her arms frantically.

A low-grinding pop heralded the arrival of the crazy elf. He looked a little confused at first before realizing he was past Harry's wards. He straightened up and tried to look presentable before swinging to face Walburga and bow submissively to her. Harry looked on at the Kreacher's display of kowtowing to his mistress and shook his head. The elf was seriously nuts.

"The boy here lost the Horcrux, Kreacher," she spat, sneering at Harry. Kreacher shot him a disgruntled look. "I charge you to find it. I know that the nasty blood traitor I'm loathed to call my son has placed numerable restrictions on you, but if it's somewhere you can feasibly access, look for it there. Someone took it, find out who and tell both me and the boy."

"Snake boy lost Dark Lord's soul?" Kreacher croaked in derision as his mistress disappeared beyond the frame's boundaries. "Kreacher thought snake boy was protecting it until he could destroy it!"

"I didn't know it was a Horcrux," Harry retorted, running an agitated hand through his hair. "I didn't get zapped by the blasted thing now did I? That's how the other was reacting toward me."

"Snake boy wore gloves," Kreacher murmured to himself, "perhaps that is why snake boy did not feel zing from locket. Mistress will want a full report, Kreacher should start his search soon. If only nasty Black would let me leave the grounds, Kreacher could find it easily."

"I did wear gloves," Harry said running his hand over his face in disbelief. "Then I put it in the pouch and never touched it with my bare hand. Kreacher find out who broke into my room, that'll tell us who to search for the Horcrux."

Kreacher nodded and swept the floor with the tip of his snout-like nose before popping away. Harry flung himself onto the bed and let loose an inarticulate sound of disgruntlement. Voldemort's Horcruxes were all but magnetically drawn to him! They kept cropping up like niffles! How was he supposed to single-handedly destroy another one? The first real conscious try killed Serion--who next? Hermione? Hedwig?

Harry sighed but bolted upright when Kreacher popped back into the room. "Merlin's balls, Kreacher you're going to be the death of me!"

"Snake boy has received present through mail room. Your nasty twin was trying to open it as if it was addressed to him. Kreacher stuck him to the wall, serves the repulsing little mudblood right."

Harry plucked the package out of Kreacher's hands and sent the elf away with a shooing motion. He opened the envelope first, bemused by the muggle-style stationary. Pulling out the letter he read:

Harry,

I know we agreed to exchange gifts at the start of the new term, but I simply couldn't wait. I know, dreadfully unfair, but seeing as I finished

these just after the first weekend back with my folks I had to go out and buy the time-delayed delivery option from the owl post office in Diagon Alley. I do hope you like them. I think the second item will go great with your new hair.

I probably won't get to hear from you until we meet at the station in the New Year, but I wanted to let you know that I will be thinking of you every moment I'm away. I hope you think of me often as well. I'm going to miss talking to you horribly. I don't see how I will be able to enjoy the Floating Golden Buddha or the Great Magical India Museum in Delhi. I know you would have loved to visit the Gandhi exhibit. I shall endeavor to remember everything so you can hear all the details.

Happy Christmas Harry!

*Love,
Hermione*

Harry laughed at her zaniness and put the letter aside. Feeling good already, Harry pulled the strings tying the package together and peeled away the brown paper wrapping a thick-papered box. He pulled the top up and off, tossing it gently onto the mattress beside him.

Inside was a brightly colored green sweater. Harry opened it out and saw that in the front she had knitted him a black raven. Smiling, Harry pulled out smaller item which turned out to be a cap. It was a little misshapen but Harry loved it. It was black with a green trim to match his sweater.

Quickly he tried them on and checked out his reflection in the mirror. The sweater was a little tight across the chest, but not uncomfortable. The arms were long but Harry didn't mind, he just rolled up the sleeves and marveled at the fact that he could do something so simple. He was so used to things being too short; it was hard to believe he had something that was made for him to fit him.

The cap hid his messy hair for the most part, but his bangs slipped through. His red hair was highlighted against the blackness of the cap and contrasted nicely with the green of the trimming. He looked good

and it touched him that she would spend so much time on a gift for him. He wished fervently for a way to tell her just how much he liked them, envying his brother's communication mirrors in that particular moment.

Harry fingered one of the knitted holes and worried suddenly about getting Hermione her gift. He was without means and without ideas. Harry felt the lump of sapphire in his pocket and pondered how much money he could get for it if he couldn't get the curses off. Places in Knockturn Alley would buy the sketchy artifact, but the Diagon jewelers would pay more for a gem this size.

He decided that if he couldn't get Walburga to give up the secrets on how to cast the anti-charms then he would have to sneak out tomorrow to go shopping. Of course he would be sneaking out anyway, but he'd prefer to be taking with him a harmless gem. Decided, Harry left the room seeking Mrs. Black.

°«««°»»°End Chapter 28°«««°»»°

Chapter 29

Harry was looking forward to climbing on board the Hogwarts Express in just three days. He kept the sapphire on his person at all times, feeling its weight and the continued tiny aftershocks of having the harmful magic forcefully removed from it. Walburga had finally relented under his persistent pestering and disclosed the spells that would drain or break the wards on the sapphire.

Breaking the sapphire was not Harry's only activity, he had also accomplished much more than he could have imagined with his Occlumency training; thanks to some of the more obscure and protected tomes within the Black library that Walburga had directed him to.

The red lights he encountered had easily directed him to his memory center, just like the voice had said and were only too helpful in the building of his defenses, which, right now, were rudimentary at best but, considering they were his first attempt, Harry was proud of them.

Currently, he was using wind to guard his memories. Wind had many associations that Harry liked and he applied them as a set to his mind. The first line of defense was a gentle breeze redirecting the intruder out followed by a second shifting wind that would toss random memories back and forth, whipping around the pursuer quite vigorously at the first sign of any resistance. His last defense was a forceful gale blowing and howling in rage with a selection of his worst memories that Harry didn't mind showing to a potential enemy. He would add more and reinforce the current defenses when he wasn't too distracted by the things happening around him. Chief among which was the location of Voldemort's Horcrux.

Unfortunately, Kreacher hadn't been able to sniff out anything about the locket. In disgust, Walburga had gone to the trustworthy portraits in the townhouse with help of Harry's boundary extension spellwork. Harry had been surprised by the number of portraits that had multiple frames in many important and influential buildings. Three alone had access in Hogwarts; one in the infirmary, one in the Slytherin common room and the last in the Headmaster's office, though

Walburga didn't tell the last one anything interesting; it seemed she didn't trust him.

Harry had been surprised to note that that particular portrait was in his own bedroom. Since then, Harry made sure to avoid doing anything in his room he wanted hidden from the Headmaster, choosing instead to work in the attic with the hippogriff in residence; it was a well isolated spot away from all portraits. The attic proved a good choice and still served him well for spell practicing and conducting his business.

If that wasn't enough to have on his mind, Hedwig was still not to be seen or heard from, which worried Harry greatly. During the nights, he kept the window open in hope of her return. At times his worry was so great his mind came up with fanciful reasons for why she wasn't back. Once he was sure she was lying hurt somewhere needing his help. Others times he was positive she was doing all right but had gone far to hunt, he even went so far to speculate on her love life, that she met a male owl that caught her fancy; unfortunately that mental image was not so easy to discard. The waiting, however, was making him jittery.

It became so bad that he couldn't concentrate on spell casting anymore. On the fourth day of her absence he had tried throwing one of the spells he'd seen Snape use and nearly hit the hippogriff. The hapless creature gave one warning screech and Harry knew he should stop. If he hit the beast there would be an angry rampaging hippogriff making swift work of Harry's insides judging by the look in its orange eyes.

On the sixth day he couldn't even concentrate enough to read. The volumes of Dark Arts material Walburga had given him access to were put on hold. Whenever he sat down his leg would start jumping spasmodically a sure sign of his pent up agitation. It was on the eighth day that Harry knew he had to get out of the house and do something even if he couldn't find his owl.

But escaping seemed nigh impossible. For the four straight days that he had tried to get out of Grimmauld Place, Dumbledore had displayed a such a degree of sixth sense--it was uncanny. The old

coot would show up needing to talk to him about some trivial or banal thought that had occurred in his office tower.

The impromptu meetings greatly vexed him for Harry always felt he was being manipulated and probed. The topic shifted more often than not to the Dark Lord, whether it was about his younger years as Tom Riddle or later with his fashioned name Voldemort. Each time Harry felt he had to be obscure as his answers were sure to be scrutinized and dissected by the Headmaster's piercing mind. Harry was getting tired of it and was going to claim Death Eater status if only to see how the old busybody would react.

Harry, despite the highly interfering behavior of Dumbledore, was determined to make his daytrip today. He was going to wait until everyone was going in for lunch to escape. And thus he found himself on the ground floor hallway trying to read and failing to keep his patience. He closed the book with a disgruntled sigh and leaned his head back against the wall, shifting his weight around to get more comfortable.

"Oh, good, I've been looking for you everywhere," an apprehensive voice said coming down the stairs.

Harry opened one eye to peer at his father, as James moved over to him quickly.

"If your mother asks, we've been goofing around in the kitchen all right?" James said quickly, throwing an anxious look over his shoulder and hurrying on.

Harry raised a brow in dry humor at James' retreating back.

"I'M GOING TO KILL YOU, JAMES!" the shrill, dulcet tones of his mother's voice drifted down to him.

A second later Lily flew down the stairs, her red hair flying out in chunks. Harry stared incredulously at her appearance, immediately wondering what sort of prank James just pulled off. Potion? Hex? Curse? Lily blew past him before halting and hurrying back. She stood hands on hips, fury blazing in her bright green eyes.

"Where is your father?" she demanded.

"Hiding," Harry said, swallowing back a bark of laughter at her balding head.

"Where?" she huffed impatiently. Harry pointed down the hall. "Thank you, dear," she managed before marching down the hall.

Harry shook his head and flipped open his book again. He had read a sentence when two slippers broke into his line of sight. He shut the book again and looked up to see his mother's puzzled face.

"When did you change your hair Daniel?"

Harry's eyes hardened and his face stiffened in affront. "I'm Harry."

Her eyes cleared before filling up with discomfort. "Sorry, honey," she said inanely, and turned away again.

He grumbled after her disparagingly, "Honestly why do you even bother."

Lily didn't hear him and turned the corner, unconcerned with her forgotten son once again, her imminent row with her husband taking up all her thought. Harry rolled his eyes and stood up, dusting off his slacks and heading toward the front door. With his parents yelling across the house at each other, he had enough of a distraction going on to make good on his escape plans. At the front entryway he put on his matching knitted cap, reached for the handle and swung the door open.

Outside was chillier than he thought it would be and he tugged down the length of the sleeves on his new sweater. His breath fogged the air and Harry looked about trying to figure out where exactly he was in London. The rundown townhouses weren't exactly encouraging or informative.

Traveling by Floo had its conveniences and its inconveniences as far as he was concerned. Not knowing where you were in comparison to everything else was one of the inconveniences. On the other hand being able to go someplace you just know the name of was a far sight

better than needing to have already been there or looking up the coordinates for Apparition.

Glancing around surreptitiously, Harry looked for any muggles who might be in the area. Seeing none, he drew out his wand and cast a quick warming charm on himself. As the warmth spread through his body he walked to the nearest street sign in hopes of figuring out where he was. The signs proved to be as unhelpful as one of Luna's charming theories.

Harry looked around and picked the most promising direction and started walking. He'd either find out where he was soon or he would Apparate from the most isolated location he could find. A few blocks down Harry discovered that he wasn't that far from the Leaky Cauldron. The surprising bit of news cheered him up greatly.

Hurrying along with a greater sense of purpose, Harry made a mental checklist of the things he would do. First he would have to sell the sapphire. Then taking the money, he would spend what he needed for Hermione's gift and pocket the rest. After that, Harry would need to try and locate Hedwig by going to the owl post office at the end of Diagon Alley by purchasing the efforts of one of their owl locaters, and maybe glean how they did it if the caster didn't cast silently. He would also have to try finding the Horcrux, but since he thought it was likelier to be farther than Diagon Alley he wouldn't worry about that until the end of his trip.

He came upon the dirty rundown sign for the pub not ten minutes later and slipped into the nondescript building with nary a glance from the passing muggles. The place was a tad crowded, certainly not to full capacity, but the volume of the parsonage present was more than enough to knock the socks off of Harry when he first opened the door. Quickly traversing the distance from the front door to the back door, Harry stepped outside once again and tapped the bricks to open the gate to the alley.

The crowds of Diagon Alley were changed from the bubbling boisterous mass he saw at the start of the term. Instead, there were sparse groups of twos and threes scurrying around the alley trying to get things done as quickly as possible, desperate to leave.

Outside tenders were trying to sell safety amulets and other questionable items in their desire to prey upon the terrified populace for an easy galleon. Harry watched as a little girl was hurried around them by her grandmother with a stern scolding not to touch anything from their carts.

When the girl and her grandmother entered the book shop, Harry started striding down the street purposefully. Of course the unapproachable veneer he was going for might have been slightly marred by his green sweater and cap which were both too bright and cheerful to be anything standoffish or intimidating.

The cold was starting to bother him as the charm wore off and he was anxious to enter the jewelry shop. The store was sandwiched between two other buildings, the three together looked exceedingly eclectic and very cozy. Walking in, a bell above the door jingled, alerting the man working behind one of the counters of his presence.

The sales clerk looked in askance at Harry's appearance but made no comment on it. "How may I help you, sir?"

"I would like to speak with the owner of the shop. I have something I think he would like to see."

"*She* won't be interested in what a upstart like you has obviously stolen. Verbena Larkspur is a very busy woman and she--"

"Will see the boy," came a warm voice overriding the sales clerk who jumped at the interjection.

"Yes, ma'am," he said nervously obviously besotted with his boss.

Harry smiled at the gregarious woman who stepped out of the back room. Her hair was bright red and coiled elegantly behind her head in a series of lustrous curls only magic could provide. Her tapered blue-violet robes cut off just below her knees giving her appearance a very chic muggle aspect. She extended a pale hand which Harry shook tentatively afraid he might break her.

"So what can I do for you--?" she waited for him to fill in his name.

"Harry," he inserted, releasing her hand.

"Verbena, though you may call me Verbbie."

"Yes, well you see I have something I would like to sell you, but I would rather not do the transaction out here."

She examined him, looking for something deceitful in him. "Did you steal it?" she ask finally.

Harry shook his head, because technically Mrs. Black gave it to him through Kreacher. "No I did not, but I need some extra galleons right now."

"Are you on the run?" Verbbie asked shrewdly, arching one trimmed eyebrow at him.

"If I was, would I tell you?" he countered, taking his hat off and running a hand through his dark locks.

"I see you had a coloring charm go awry," she noted, pointing at the red stripe in his locks.

Harry nodded. "My sister did while I was sleeping," he lied.

"Why don't you show me what you've got then," Verbbie said, leading him to the back room.

Harry stepped through the threshold and Verbena grabbed his left arm with a strength he didn't know she could possess and thrust the sleeve back past his elbow. The action surprised Harry but he recovered quickly and yanked his arm back as he drew his wand on her. Shoving the sleeve down roughly, he glowered at the redhead.

"What the hell was that for?" he demanded, leveling his wand point with her nose.

"I had to make sure you weren't a Death Eater impersonating Daniel Potter now didn't I? Besides I know you don't have a sister, so you were lying and I wanted to find out why. It was natural to assume you were working for You-Know-Who impersonating Daniel."

Harry's mouth firmed into a thin, nasty line. "I'm not Daniel."

"Sure you aren't dearie," Verbbie said, agreeably. "How many Potter boys are there with scars and the trademark messy black hair?" she added pointedly. Harry opened his mouth to argue when she interrupted, "Now what does the Boy-Who-Lived wish to sell?"

Resisting the urge to argue with her anymore, Harry pulled from his pocket the gently wrapped stone revealing the large sapphire. Verbena gasped audibly and quickly summoned her examiners goggles and reached out for the stone. Harry handed it over gently and she appraised the gem.

"I'll give you twenty thousand galleons," she said, continuing to examine the sapphire with a greedy expression.

"That's not nearly enough for the size and quality," Harry countered. "Don't try to con me here. I wouldn't take less than a billion galleons or two billion pounds."

Verbena nearly dropped the stone in shock. Harry took it from her quickly wrapping it back up and slipping it into his pocket once more before adding silently the anti-theft charm with a marginal flick of his pointer finger. Verbena eyed the large bulge and the eager gleam in her eyes told Harry that he had sold the jewel before she was able to school her features into a cool and collected mask. She was no longer the vivacious woman of five minutes ago but a shrewd calculating business woman.

"You wouldn't be here if you thought you could really get that much. Five hundred thousand galleons and not a knut more, it's more than generous."

"I know how much this is worth and if you're not going to play in the same pitch as me, then I'm leaving." Harry started walking toward the door when she stopped him by stepping in his way.

"Three million galleons."

Harry gave her a disgruntled look and sidestepped her. "Obviously you are not taking me seriously. I will go elsewhere, perhaps to a

muggle shop where they know the real worth of something like what I'm offering."

Verbbie, desperate, waylaid Harry with a hand on his shoulder. "I do not have the money to buy something this extravagant. Even the richest of muggles would have a hard time coughing that kind of money up. Let me find you a buyer for it for a commission cut of thirty percent."

"Half a percent," Harry countered.

"Fifteen," she wheedled.

"I can find other people to--"

"Yes, but not at the price you're asking for. It's a large sum that, face it, how many purebloods in England could really afford at that price? Why not let me cut it up and we can sell chunks of it to several at high prices."

"I take it you'd still want your fifteen percent," Harry guessed, listening to her.

"Certainly! I would be doing most of the work after all you would just have to wait around for the deposits into your account."

"A finder's fee is only ten percent at Gringotts..."

"I'll take it!" she announced, shaking his hand enthusiastically.

"Any anything you do to the stone that damages profits?"

"My expense," she assured him. "You'll not lose a sickle or a knut in this venture."

"Deal," he said, still holding her hand.

A magic crimson ribbon flashed around their hands and knotted firmly, setting the deal in stone. Harry's head spun as he let go and took several steps back from Verbenia. The deal was done.

The redhead grinned a tad smugly and held her hand out. "Just give me your account number and the gem dearie, and we're ready to get started. I'll even give you the twenty-thousand galleons I offered in the first place as an upfront sum because I'm so nice."

"Why don't you write me a transfer sheet and authorize it. I'll set things up at Gringotts and forward you my account for the money."

"Great," Verbena said, hustling over to her neat and tidy desk and yanking open the third drawer down on the left hand side.

She took out a document and grabbed a quill from the holder, opened her black ink and dipped the quill. For the next few minutes she was busily scratching away down the sheet of parchment. When she was done she used her wand to dry the ink and handed it over to him.

Harry took it from her and slipped it into his robes after a quick perusal, noting that she had written it out to Mr. Potter, leaving out his first name. "I trust we are well on our way to something profitable for both of us."

He gave her the gem and watched her place it in a vault. She looked up when the lock had clicked in place. "I believe we will Mr. Potter," she said following him out of her office.

"Do watch out for the nifflers," Harry said, exiting the shop, the bell overhead tinkling lightly.

Once outside, Harry pulled his cap back on and stamped his feet a few times to get use to the cold. The jewelers must have excellent warming charms to beat this cold. It started snowing as he walked down the street to the big white leaning structure that housed the wizarding bank.

This time Harry entered the building with arrogance, not pausing to acknowledge the goblin guard at the door for extra security or to say the polite greetings when he met up with Lagnort behind the teller counter. He insisted on being escorted to see Mr. Raypirnk once more with urgency. A large bulky male was called forth and Harry didn't bother to remember his name as he followed the goblin back

into the recesses of the bank. After a brief polite knock on Raypirnk's door Harry dismissed the goblin escort and barged into the office.

Mr. Raypirnk glanced up, clearly agitated by the presumptuous action on Harry's part, but Harry ignored the goblin's feelings and sat himself down with the arrogance of a Malfoy. Harry threw a leg up and propped his elbows on the sides of the chair, steeping his fingers.

"We meet again Raypirnk," Harry addressed coolly confident. "Only this time you won't have the last laugh. I am prepared to open a bank account here at Gringotts and you will find a way to accommodate me so that I walk out of this office with my new key."

"I don't have to do anything of the sort," Raypirnk started, baring two rows of tiny teeth. "Now get out of my office."

"Oh but you do," Harry replied, arching a knowing eyebrow. "After all Gringotts always appreciates new gold, right? Now, I want a standard savings account, with the minimum amount of protection. I'll not pay for any useless extras and I expect it to be done to the best of your cursebreakers' abilities. The only thing I am going to add is the premium account's registering log that jots down the magical signature and name of any who enters or accesses my vault."

"Mr. Potter, there's a reason it's on the premium account and not on the standard. If you would like a premium vault warding done, you simply have to upgrade your account."

Harry shook his head. "No, you'll do what I say because I want it that way and because I can afford it." Harry drew out the transfer sheet from his robes and glared at the goblin before him. "Well why aren't you getting a move on Raypirnk? I'm very busy and can't waste any more time than necessary."

A sour Raypirnk started pulling out stacks of papers and writing on them with a muggle pen. Harry watched with dry humor at the goblin's attempt to cause offence by using such a basic muggle tool. Harry however knew exactly what pens were and how they worked from three years of Muggle Studies before dropping it after his O.W.L.S. The sight wasn't about to affront his sensibilities.

When five minutes had passed, Harry sighed and told the goblin to speed up. Two minutes later, a swift footed messenger came with a box. Raypirnk took the wood box from the underling and opened it to reveal Harry's new vault key. Harry took it and felt the key accept and record his magical signature. Delighted, Harry stuck it into his robes and stood up.

"Now that that is settled. I shall go see about getting some deposit and withdrawal slips and some cheques. Good day Raypirnk, it's been a pleasure."

Harry found his way back on to the main floor of the bank and settled himself back in line for the tellers. This time he chose the smallest line, which wasn't the esteemed Lagnort's and got what he wanted including a messenger over to Verbena's store with the details for direct deposits into his vault.

Walking down Diagon Alley, Harry smirked. He now carried enough cheques to pay for anything he so desired and twenty thousands galleons in a new bank account. For the first time he could be his own man and he owed it all to a screaming pureblood portrait.

The first order of business required a stop in the post owl office to hire a tracker for Hedwig, who still hadn't shown up. The worry gnawing in the pit of his stomach was starting to give him stomach aches. Harry watched the tracker place a spell on the feather he had brought with him from Hedwig's cage before leaving. He didn't understand what the color it turned meant, but the tracker seemed to and shooed him away.

Outside, Harry took a moment to use the point me spell in an attempt to find the Horcrux. Needless to say it failed. Harry sighed and put his wand away and walked on.

At Twilfit and Tatting's Harry procured himself a new wardrobe, and as a special treat to himself, got all his new robe sets in silk, including a dark red dress robe embroidered in black. The goods would be delivered by owl, at a price of course, before Harry went off to Hogwarts. The owner thanked Harry as he handed the cheque for seven-hundred-and-thirty galleons, nine sickles, and fourteen knuts

over. Apparently he had been the most business the shop had seen since Voldemort's attack on Somerset.

At WhizzHard Books Harry grabbed many things for himself and Hermione. Whereas Flourish and Blotts carried scholarly texts or self-help tomes for the most part, WhizzHard Books carried a plethora of fiction works. He made sure to grab a witch fairy tale set for Hermione and a few stories about muggles, which if nothing else, were good for a laugh.

His last stop of the day was at a certain junk shop located on the Alley. There he found the gift he'd been hoping to get Hermione. Another three-hundred-eighty-five galleons and odd change later, Harry held twin hand mirrors, just like the pair Daniel and Ron shared. He was going to give her both and hope, she might make him the recipient of one if she didn't give the second to her parents. It would certainly make conversing much easier if she went on holiday again.

Thinking about Hermione made the ache of worry in his stomach ease a little. He couldn't wait to meet up with her again and hear about her trip to India and tell her about his dreadful stay with his family, including the new Horcrux that had been stolen out from under him. Perhaps if he got his way, there wouldn't be much talking the first half of the train ride back. Harry grinned, he was looking forward to it.

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 29°«««°»»»°

Chapter 30

Harry was still waiting outside the scarlet express for Hermione. They had planned before the start of holiday to meet up here and she had yet to arrive. Daniel, meanwhile, had ditched the station in favor of the comforts to be found onboard the train about fifteen minutes ago.

Harry scanned the incoming groups of people for Hermione. He couldn't see her anywhere and Hedwig, who had shown up on her own last night was sleeping in her cage, completely exhausted from her journey. He had sent her with a quick missive to the tracker to cancel the job before she could really rest. Poor girl didn't even hoot a feeble retort at being jostled around when they had arrived at the platform.

The crowds grew thinner and soon the Hogwarts Express was giving a long, low blow of its horn to indicate it was starting down the tracks. Harry backed up and grabbed a railing, placing Hedwig behind him on the steps. He leaned out of the train watching for Hermione who by now was running desperately late. She had to be fretting about making the train with all her things. He had his wand out ready to summon her things from her so she could run more easily and hurry to catch up with the train.

Incredulous, Harry watched the platform disappear as the express rounded the first turn. Hermione had missed the train. Harry looked back at his exhausted owl and knew he'd have to wait until he reached Hogwarts to tell a professor that Hermione wasn't with them. They would be able to locate her and get her safely back to school.

Hermione was going to be ballistic when she found out she had missed the train. She took school and her head duties very seriously. She'd worry endlessly about missing her patrol duties onboard and the first meeting of the new semester with the other head and prefects. He was sure she would be complaining about that in the days to come until school work took over their lives and the push for N.E.W.T.S grew heavier on the mind.

Harry pulled himself all the way inside and picked Hedwig up off the steps before climbing into the passenger carriage. Strolling down the aisle, Harry looked for an empty compartment; however most of the

compartments were full, so Harry continued toward the back of the train. Three quarters of the way back, Harry walked by a full compartment and kept going only to stop and reverse steps.

Inside Daniel and his buddies were laughing and talking. Harry couldn't hear a word of what they were saying but he could see something that filled his gut with a cold sick feeling. Hermione was in there, her head on Daniel's shoulder, and Crookshanks in her lap. The kneazle's orange eyes accused Harry for the current position he was in with Daniel scratching behind his ears and a smart smack on his nose for a warning hiss. Harry had never felt so loved by the cat before.

Harry tore his eyes away from the scene and with a heavy heart walked to the end of the carriage. He paused, his hand on the door handle, and dropped his head. He should have known this was going to happen. Didn't it always happen? But he had thought Hermione was different. Something special--he--he loved her. The cold feeling grew in his stomach, immobilizing him as thoughts whirled in his mind. Memories of them flashed by quickly, easily drawn up thanks to his continued practice of Occlumency.

Their first kiss came to mind, hesitant and tantalizing all at once, the shock of feeling that raced through him when their lips touched. The kiss had melted into several more right there in the midst of the library stacks until they emerged for air, breathing heavily and smiling happily their head clouded with foggy thoughts. He saw Hermione giggling uncontrollably in relief beneath him until he kissed her, effectively diverting her attention. He recalled how her nose twitched as she studied, mentally arguing the whole time with the author as she read for Divination. Her dislike of the subject and continued perseverance to see the class through was a source of great amusement to him.

Harry dropped the handle and turned around. He was going to get to the bottom of this treachery. There had to be something more! Some bewitchment or curse on her performed by Daniel. He'd been sniffing after her from the first time Harry had shown interest. The cold feeling in his gut solidified and burned hotly, focusing on his brother.

He yanked the compartment door open, startling the inhabitants. Harry had eyes only for Hermione and Daniel. His world narrowed down to them and he strode forward, an unconscious shield snapping into place around him as someone behind him tossed a hex at his back. They didn't try again. Harry stopped, towering over the subdued couple.

"What the hell do you think you are doing, Harry?" Daniel yelled, moving to stand up.

Harry took out his wand and leveled it at Hermione's chest. "*Finite!*" he said before anybody could do something to stop him.

When nothing happened but a growing angry expression on her face, Harry took a step backwards in disbelief. A hurt expression crossed his face before he quickly schooled his features into the cool mask he had perfected all his life. He turned to Daniel, the icy hot feeling in him spreading, constricting his throat for just a moment.

"It seems you've won yet again, brother of mine."

Daniel smirked. "It wasn't even a competition. Hermione and I have been together this whole time. Haven't we, luv?" He turned toward her, smiling slightly.

Hermione nodded, slipping her hand into Daniel's. "I did like you Harry," she offered, "but Daniel is something else, you know?"

"No, I don't know," Harry replied unhelpfully. "Why don't you tell me?"

"Back off Harry," Daniel said, blocking Harry's view of Hermione. "She doesn't have to explain herself to you."

Harry tensed his jaw, saying nothing as he squashed the impulse to blast his brother aside. He fingered his grip on the wand, relishing in the smooth texture before replacing it as calmly as he could in his robes. Daniel's smirk grew at the sign of Harry's capitulation.

"If that's the way you two want to play it," Harry said, his mask slipping, replaced by a cruel sneer. "Then I'll leave you two lovebirds to it."

Harry whirled around with Hedwig and stormed out of the compartment with his head held aloft. Hedwig hooted indignantly at his rough handling or maybe at Hermione's total personality change. Seething rage brewed beneath the surface, lighting an emotion that had been building for years. Daniel the Dipshit was going down, Harry thought, dumping his things and placing Hedwig and her cage into the only empty compartment on the whole train and shutting the door. He threw himself against the cushions after letting Hedwig out so she could rest on the top of the opposite seat.

For the rest of the train ride he pondered the fruitlessness of his life and cursed the both of them until he ran out of clever, witty, and snarky things to call them. He fell asleep in his livid state halfway to Hogwarts and dreamt of Daniel and Hermione together in weird half-formed segments, the sick feeling in his stomach returning and churning his insides.

§Nagini, my dear,§ he hissed, pulling himself from out of the chair. §We mustn't cool our heels any longer. Harry Potter should have reached a decision by now. We shall send him a missive.§

§Yes, Master,§ Nagini sighed softly, curling around his shoulders, her tongue tickling his ear. §Daniel is no longer important,§ she stated more than asked.

§You're right, my dear, he is not. Harry is the true prophecy child; the one I attacked; the little brat that was willing to sacrifice himself for the other sniveling one. How we were too blind to notice before is beyond me, because now it seems downright obvious.§

§So we write the young Potter boy and when he meets with us we kill and eat him then go to Germany.§

He rapped her lightly on the skull. §No, Nagini, we see what he has to say. We will soon find out just what Harry Potter is made of; whether he be for us or against us. Will he be my pet or Dumbledore's is no matter, but we will have to watch him as he is powerful... oh yes is he powerful...§

§And Germany, master?§

§Germany will come, my dear, as it always does for our little check ups,§ he said quietly, thinking. §Perhaps instead of checking on Godric's garter we will check up on our father's father's ring.§

§Do not forget to question Malfoy on his progress to locate the cup.§

He strolled out of the castle and down the hill away from the wards. §I will not forget,§ he said after a while, §that Malfoy's uses are dwindling rather than flourishing. Like Bella, like Pettigrew. I need the vibrancy of youth to fuel this war and once again we will need fresh recruitments.§

§Why is it the old get stogy and set in their ways?§ Nagini asked, shifting to settle herself more comfortably before he aparated away.

§I do not know, but I fear I am becoming complacent once again...§ he said, turning on his heel and disappearing from sight.

Harry woke up sweating with pain in his scar and with a new weight settling in his stomach. It was true then, he thought vaguely trying to grab at the elusive fragments of his dream, that he was indeed the real Boy-Who-Lived. He had always suspected, but here was proof. And what was that about Germany? He tried to recall and found his thoughts too unfocused, the deadweight of this new revelation competing with the coldness of his gut and Hermione's betrayal.

Hedwig flew into his lap and Harry stroked her feathers silently, his mind elsewhere. The rage had receded and he stared out of the window, numb to it all. And the minutes passed like hours and the hours like days until the sun set and the motion of the train slowed down. Harry pulled himself from his thoughts and opened the window, letting a reluctant Hedwig depart and fly the short distance to the school and her home in the owlery.

The remainder of the time left on the train, Harry spent pacing. The longer he thought about it the less he was inclined to think it hadn't been a ruse, a clever trick. To think he fell for her, the bint! He acted like a lovesick fool and how she must have laughed her pretty little head off at that. How could he have been so stupid, so blind as to not see what had been in front of him the entire time?

He should have listened to his gut that first night he saw her looking freshly fucked coming in from patrols. She'd slapped him, she had said, stopping Daniel from taking another liberty with her person, that she didn't want Daniel, only him, Harry. But he'd been right all along to despise Daniel, to be jealous of their patrols, that they were really eating each other's faces the whole time instead of looking for other groping couples and school troublemakers like they were suppose to, like she claimed they were doing.

Idiot, he thought, slamming a fist against the sliding door, feeling the wood vibrate beneath his hand. He had wanted her to be his so badly, he had been willing to look past everything. He laughed mirthlessly. He had had her all right; he had been her first lover. That, Harry knew couldn't be faked, but why sleep with him when she really wanted Daniel? Why lower herself to have a fuck with him?

Harry paused, recalling a previous conversation where he had accused Hermione of being with him because it was like practice to be with Daniel. That was it then, wasn't it? She had slept with him to learn all his quirks so she could show Daniel she was amazing in bed. She wanted to be a seductress for Daniel and had to practice with him--to get over the awkwardness of the first time!

"I should have known better," he growled under his breath as the train stopped at the Hogsmeade station. "I should have known better than to expect something good to happen to me."

Harry patted his pockets, checking that his shrunken trunk was there before picking up Hedwig's cage and leaving the train with the rest of the students. Students gazed at him warily as he went by them, but he didn't notice, his attention focused inwards. He loaded himself into a thestral-drawn carriage and shut the door with a force that shook the whole body. As he left the station behind, Harry spared it one last look before a grim excuse for a grin settled on his features. The Head Boy and Girl had better watch themselves this term.

--

The Great Hall ceiling was gray and bleak. Snow drifted down hazily as the sun fought the clouds for presence in the sky. It was February and Harry was sitting across from a deceptively quiet Luna, not

speaking with her or anyone. She didn't seem to mind his presence and was one of the few people at the school that didn't openly despise him because of Daniel's new bout of rumor mongering.

He picked at his food, his appetite gone. The cold dread that filled him a month ago had stayed his constant companion, even more steady than Hedwig who seemed to recognize his need for comfort. She never got haughty or frustrated with him when he misbehaved and on occasion had even been his lookout for his latest in a string of nasty pranks.

Daniel had somehow managed to always come out of them smelling like a rose. Harry didn't know what bothered him more, his brother's ability to gain more popularity outside of Gryffindor with every prank or Hermione's easy dismissal of them. She never stayed pranked for very long as she always countered them quickly and efficiently. Whatever he did to her, she rose above it, quietly helping Daniel out of his own predicament or watching him laugh it off with friends.

He had come across them more than once, snogging and pawing at each other heavily in broom cupboards. It seemed with Daniel, Hermione was also trying to make the BC100 Club, something he was sure Daniel enjoyed every minute of. The thought of them make him so sick that only two weeks ago he had hexed Daniel to break out in boils every time he kissed Hermione. He had done the same for Hermione, but she appeared as unaffected as she usually did. It was like she wasn't even there.

Harry had also hit Daniel down by the Quidditch pitch locker rooms a week ago with a jinx he'd personally designed to put him in scanty female underwear every time he thought of having sex with Hermione. The poncy little git thought about it a lot. He was always losing his clothes at the worst of times.

He overheard in the Ravenclaw common room that they once came off near Snape and the greasy professor merely raised a gleeful eyebrow at Daniel's situation. Flitwick tried to dispel the curse and only managed to change the underwear to bright pink instead of the Slytherin colors Harry had picked out before, which impressed Harry because the spell had been cast in parseltongue.

Surprisingly, Hermione was apparently too distracted by her newly announced boyfriend, to even care about her falling grades. They were slipping so far down the scale, that Harry couldn't even garner a small kernel of satisfaction from it. McGonagall had mentioned it again and again in class, taking more and more points from Ravenclaw for her lack of preparation and shoddy schoolwork. Same held true for the other teachers, though they seemed more worried about finding out what was wrong with her than taking points from her.

Harry noticed Dumbledore watching him at every meal as a predator would its prey. It was like the Headmaster was waiting for one foot to be put out of place. He could see in the wizard's eyes that he blamed everything wrong at the school on his head, from the new house alliances (which only Daniel could break through) and McGonagall's attitude, to Hermione's blatant ignorance of her duties and coursework.

In the end Harry blocked his emotions off, retreating to the unsociable standoffish mask of the forgotten and overlooked twin, using it as a barrier between him and everyone else. With it on, he could pretend he wasn't hurt by Hermione's actions. He could pretend he was fine, unchanged from the start of the year. However, the loss of his appetite for food and life could not be hidden so easily.

He thought constantly about packing up and leaving, taking his money from the deal with Verbena and exploring the world. But it smacked too much like running away, giving in, and letting Daniel win. Sometimes in the deepest dark of night, he dreamt about stealing Hermione back; but he would always wake up and his head would tell him not to be ridiculous.

Gradually Harry dragged himself from his internal thought processes and focused on the zany girl before him chewing on the end of a blueberry sugar quill. Her giant blue eyes were lost in thought. The sight was sexy without meaning to be. Luna was without artifice and that was something Harry greatly appreciated at the moment.

She sensed his gaze and took the quill out of her mouth. Her cherry red lips pouting slightly in thought before she said candidly, "If you keep staring a tifflepod will enter your pupils and eat away at the

inside of your eyeballs. I hear it's dreadfully painful. You should be careful."

"Really?" Harry said, bemusement slipping through his stoic mask. "Who told you this?"

She suckled on her sugar quill for a moment. "My grandpappy."

"Was he telling you stories?"

She shrugged, leaning over to gather her things. "Grandpappy very much liked to tell tall tales and small tales. I never bothered a wit to sort them all out. He's dead now." Harry didn't know what to say so he said nothing. Luna continued blithely, "You and Hermione got bitten by the misfortune flea. If you could find it and destroy it you two would be free of your miseries."

"Hermione's perfectly fine," Harry scoffed, the cold anger burning intensely at the thought of her.

"Is she?" Luna asked, frowning slightly. "She acts as an inferi would or a mummy; present but not all there. In the future you should remember that the queen says it's a poor sort of memory that only works backward."

"What does that mean?" Harry asked, puzzled.

"I can't explain myself, I'm afraid, sir, because I'm not myself you see."

"It would be so nice if something made sense for a change," Harry grumbled, sinking his head onto his arms.

"Now you're getting somewhere," Luna said brightly.

Harry watched her leave shaking his head at the blonde Ravenclaw's retreating back. He glanced across the hall and saw Hermione feeding Daniel pieces of fruit between kisses and his mask fell into place once again. Thrusting the bitter emotions away, Harry too gathered his things and left the hall.

--

"Have you found anything?" Harry asked the old house elf bowing before him. "Anything at all about the locket?"

"No, Kreacher has not found anything. Kreacher has looked for snake boy and Mistress, oh he has looked. Kreacher asked other elves what they knew and none were able to dig anything up."

Harry sighed, raking a hand through his hair and looking around the Chamber with bloodshot eyes before turning back. "That's okay. I know you're trying your hardest. Keep looking; follow any lead no matter how brief or cold."

"Of course Kreacher will, snake boy. Kreacher will search high and low again. Perhaps he will find something that was overlooked before."

"Good."

--

Harry read the slip of paper Luna had snuck into his backpack for a third time and shook his head. All her riddles and silly quotes and factual fictions, they never made any sense to him and neither did this:

Kisses may come and kisses may go but a sea otter is forever.

He looked up to see Hermione slipping into the common room and felt his heartbeat speed up in a curious combination of longing and resentment. He watched her, recalling the words Luna had said and for the first time he felt like he saw it. There she was plodding along and the Hermione he knew never plodded. Her hair was a frightful mess, her eyes bloodshot, her face pale and lifeless and the only thing Harry could feel was that burning sense of coldness.

--

Dumbledore beckoned with a wrinkled hand for him to take a seat. Harry groped blindly for a chair and sat down. There was a sweeping

tide of power building in the room and Harry could only figure it came from the Headmaster. He waited, wondering what this was all about and why the need for the power show.

“Do you know why I’ve asked you here today, Mr. Potter?” the Headmaster said in a voice so removed from the genial grandfather usually presented that it shocked Harry speechless.

Harry shook his head mutely, thinking of the newest letter from Voldemort still burning a hole in his pocket before remembering quickly to add a meek, “No, sir.”

“I’m sure you’ve noticed the new string of pranks that have been plaguing a few select students.”

“That’s terrible,” Harry deadpanned. “Who would do such a thing?”

Dumbledore clasped his hands over the desk and said, “I believe you would, Mr. Potter.” Harry didn’t respond, refusing to incriminate himself. “I believe, you see, that losing Miss Granger to your brother made you feel justified in seeking revenge. Your pranks are not jokes, Mr. Potter, they are cruel and thoughtless acts.”

“What my brother and Granger do together is none of my concern,” Harry replied tersely. “As for your accusations, you have no proof or you would have charged and sentenced me by now.”

“In either case, Mr. Potter, surely you are not so injured by events to not realize that your actions have caused Miss Granger undo mental grief. She’s under the strain of Head duties as well as N.E.W.T.S. and doubtless all the nuances of young love. Your added pressure to her is cracking her. She is falling apart.”

“I again place to you why this is my concern at all?”

“Because, Mr.--Harry, you once cared for her, did you not? Show her a little kindness.”

Harry’s mouth thinned at the reminder of his own foolishness. “I don’t give a wit about her, Headmaster. She should learn to fix her own

problems and you should learn to keep your overly large nose out of others' business."

"The pranks will stop Harry, or you will be expelled."

"You have no grounds, sir," Harry repeated, standing. "Only suspicions and suspicions, Headmaster, give you nothing."

"You should leave now, Mr. Potter."

--

Harry stretched his legs and stood up from the cold, stone floor. His knees creaked and his muscles ached. His skin was scratchy and dry from trying to transform himself into a basilisk, the only plus in his otherwise bleak existence. He could make his skin scaly but he couldn't push his form further than that. It was like he was mentally blocked.

§You've been a moody snot recently,§ Oorjit hissed from his perch on one of the giant snake statues. *§I've been patient, thinking you would speak with me, but apparently you do not consider me a confident. I know Serion held your ear, perhaps you would benefit from a little talk.§*

§Got all night?§ Harry asked, rubbing a tired hand over his shoulder.

§What else have I got to do?§

§Good point,§ Harry agreed, conjuring a chair and a cup which he filled with water to sooth his parched throat. *§Might as well make ourselves comfy.*

--

She walked briskly down the corridor where Harry lurked in waiting. As she walked by he snatched her arm and tugged her inside the alcove. Her face was more angry than surprised or scared and Harry drew a deep breath feeling uncertain.

"Potter--"

He clamped a hand over her mouth, fighting his body's reaction to her nearness, struggling for words. She tried jerking her arm away, but Harry held it ever more tightly.

"Hermione, you have to see that he's no good for you," he begged, hating the tone his voice took on. "You're dying Hermione. Can't you see it?"

She made a muffled noise beneath his hand and he cautiously slipped it away.

"Don't be ridiculous," she said primly.

"This isn't you, Hermione!" he countered gruffly.

"Like you would know who I am," Hermione spat. "You know nothing Potter."

"You're right," he agreed, eyes hardening. "I don't know you at all. You're not the Hermione I thought I you were, but I do know he's only using you. Why can't you see that?"

"You bastard!" she hissed angrily. "Daniel is perfect--" she yanked her arm back roughly and glared hatefully. "You can't hold a candle to him."

"Like I would want to be compared to him of all people."

"Oh please, you're so pathetic, you crave to be him. It must kill you to know you never will be."

Angry and hurt, Harry pulled her back to him as she tried to exit the alcove. He received a sharp zap along his arm for his efforts. Cursing her, Harry glanced down and froze. There resting against the swell of her breasts was the locket.

"Where did you get that?" he asked, reaching out a trembling hand.

She smacked his hand back and clutched the locket in her fist. "I got this from Daniel for Christmas, though he tried to pass it off as if it were from you. Somehow he gathered I wouldn't receive it well if it

was from him. I don't pretend to understand him, but it was the most romantic gesture."

"Hermione, you've got to trust me," Harry said shakily, staring fixedly on the small gold locket. "That locket that you're wearing is no gift. It's a Horcrux. One Daniel stole off my desk. He must have wrote a note and charmed his handwriting to be mine, that's why Hedwig took it after her hunt. You have to take it off, Hermione."

She stared incredulously at him. "Give me a break, Potter. A Horcrux? Is that the best you could do?"

"I'm not kidding Hermione! That's one of Voldemort's Horcruxes."

"Get a life," she hissed, tucking the locket back inside her blouse and robes, "and stay the hell out of mine."

"Hermione! Wait!" Harry tried to grab her again but she jerked out of his reach and ran out of the alcove and down the hall.

Harry watched her leave and felt the coldness in him coalesce into something so foreign... terror.

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 30°«««°»»»°

A/N: Quotes from Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland and Looking Through the Mirror Glass were used in the first Luna/Harry scene.

Chapter 31

Frustration and wild terror raced through him late Friday evening; one day since he'd found out what has been causing Hermione to act so unlike herself. Harry ran an agitated hand through his hair as he paced back and forth outside of the Herbology classroom Green House No. 5. The class period was almost over; he could see some student beginning to pack things up. He had to get Hermione alone to talk to her; make her see reason.

She walked out of the green house carrying a loaded book bag; briskly following a group of girls and Harry sprinted to catch up, slowing only as he reached her. When he fell into step with her, she threw him a irritated look and sped up. Harry matched her pace easily.

"Get away from me Potter," she growled, keeping her eyes firmly ahead of her.

Harry grabbed her elbow and pulled her towards the lake. Hermione struggled, but Harry didn't pay her any heed. He pushed her onto a large, flat rock and took her book bag off her shoulder and set it on the ground. She folded her arms, her bushy hair fizzling with furious energy.

Incensed, Hermione stubbornly glared at Harry, but he just ignored it and sat on his haunches. She tried to hit him and Harry caught her hand, stopping her flailing. Hermione turned her nose up at him, but Harry was determined. He shook her a bit to get her to pay attention.

"Hermione, listen to me," he pleaded. "I know you can understand the trouble you are in so listen. I don't care if Daniel, or the Queen's son gave you that locket; you need to take it off. It's not good for you Hermione."

"Get your hands off me," Hermione yelled, jerking her hands away, succeeding in only overbalancing herself and falling to the ground. Harry just pressed himself on top of her. "This is harassment Potter! Let go!"

"Shut it," Harry growled, gripping both of her wrists with his left hand, so that his right was free to grab the locket that, thanks to her struggles, was now dangling over her clothing.

"NO!!" Hermione screamed bucking wildly under him as his fingers closed around the hated object.

The locket burned into his hand, searing his flesh. The smell of smoke and burning flesh rose from where he gripped the locket, but Harry just gritted his teeth through the pain, small plumes of smoke forcing him to shut his eyes. As he started to pull it away from her and the chain tautened she increased her thrashing and she managed to wrangled an arm loose and lunged at his face.

Harry dropped the locket as her nails raked down his face and she clawed at him. He jerked his head away at the pain. Harry opened his eyes as little rivulets of blood trailed down from her marks. Hermione lunged again this time aiming for his eyes and forcing him to leap off of her.

She was panting loudly as she scrambled away to the opposite side of the rock. Harry took a few steps toward her; Hermione edging away.

"Hermione," he beseeched, holding out the hand that locket had touched, the seared flash clearly visible in the light of day.

"You come near me again and I'll tell Daniel, our Head of House, and the Headmaster," she vowed, pulling out her wand. "Accio book bag."

Her book bag flew from its spot and she caught it. Harry stared after her, breathing heavily and could not find it in himself to wield his magic against her. He knew he wouldn't succeed in ridding her of the locket using conventional methods. Hermione was growing more leery of him and if this time was anything to go by, he thought touching his cheek coming away with blood on his fingertips, then his chances at getting the locket from her with her cooperation were swiftly dwindling. The pull of the Horcrux had on her drove her to protect the very thing that was hurting her.

He would have to sneak up into the girls' dorms from the common room. A feat he knew wasn't nearly as impossible as breaking into Dumbledore's office but almost as complicated. Harry couldn't afford to waste time planning an elaborate entry, he would have to figure it out rather quickly, before Hermione could sink further into the clutches of the Horcrux.

Luckily for him, at least, she now slept in the Headgirl suite, something Hermione had spoken to Dumbledore about at Daniel's insistence. The Headmaster had opened them up for her with little fuss, not thinking it strange that she changed her mind after a term of continued existence with her friends in the seventh year girl dormitory.

"Kreacher!" Harry beckoned, walking away from the castle and toward the Forbidden Forest.

He had gone on for a bit and just as he was about to call the house elf again the grubby elf appeared. Kreacher bowed low, his snout touching the ground waiting for Harry to let him rise. Harry waved his hand and the house elf straightened.

"I've found the Horcrux," Harry said without preamble. "I actually found it last night but couldn't get it away from the person who had it."

"Kreacher could do it for snake boy. Kreacher would be delighted to kill owner to get it back."

"No!" he said forcefully, startling the elf whose bat-sized ears flapped in annoyance.

"Then what would snake boy have Kreacher do?" he asked sneering.

"I need you to find out how I can get up into the Ravenclaw girls' dorms without setting off the alarms on the stairs and at the doors. Especially the door to the Headgirl suite." "Headgirl has locket Kreacher thinks," the house elf said, "Kreacher could go after it on Mistress' orders. Kreacher could kill--"

"Kreacher will listen to snake boy," Harry inserted firmly, shaking thoughts of Hermione out of his head. "She is not to be harmed. I will

get the locket and destroy it, but first I need to know how to bypass the male intruder alarms."

Kreacher looked furious, but acquiesced. "Kreacher will do as snake boy says, but this is the last time, Kreacher will come at snake boys' call."

"Fine," Harry returned testily. "I understand. Now go and get back to me before midnight."

Kreacher bowed again, grumbling the entire time, before popping away. Harry ran his hand down his face in exhaustion. The warm trickle of blood reminded him that he had to fix himself up. Pulling out his wand, he cast a few mild healing charms and the wounds on his face and his hand closed up. Carefully, he tucked the wand back up his sleeve and looked back toward the castle.

Dusk was falling quickly and Harry forced himself to go back inside the castle. He drifted down to the kitchens, eating the food Swibby and the army of house elves provided for him. When he was done he got up and left, at first heading toward the library to complete some of the essays his professors had heaped upon them this week but lost in thought as he was, his feet took him in another direction entirely.

He found himself in Myrtle's bathroom, calling out to the dead schoolgirl. Myrtle drifted out from a u-bend and greeted Harry coyly. Harry beckoned her over and locked the bathroom off before placing several wards up and then silencing the door.

"What's going on Harry?" she asked with a little hiccup.

"Myrtle," Harry started, licking his lips, "I need to ask you something very personal." Myrtle developed a dreamy look which Harry dispelled by saying, "Why haven't you gone on to the other side?"

She pouted, floating away from him. "That is very personal. Why do you want to know?"

"Because I need your help, I would trust nobody with this but you."

"Oh?" she said intrigued. "Well, if it's important--"

"It is," Harry said earnestly. "A matter of life and death."

Myrtle grinned a little maniacally. "I like those. Okay then Harry," she said, drifting back to him. "Ghosts as you know can't cross sides because they feared something here in the world--a matter of unfinished business for some. I thought mine was pestering Olive Hornby."

"So you made her life hell," Harry said, remembering her tale.

She nodded. "She deserved it, Olive, did."

"Certainly," he replied.

"I've come to realize that what holds me here is not fear of death or old grudges but something rather more..."

--

Kreacher popped into the Ravenclaw common room at one minute to midnight. Harry raised an eyebrow at the small act of defiance on the house elf's part. Only at Harry's sign, did Kreacher began to carefully speak in a gruff whisper so that the few stragglers left downstairs did not overhear.

"How snake boy will travel up the girl stairs and get past the male intruder alarms, Kreacher has found out."

"Go on," Harry urged.

Kreacher looked hesitantly over at the group of seventh years cramming in front of the fireplace. He slunk further back into the shadows, his pig-snout nose quivering ever so slightly. "Kreacher has talked to Hogwarts elves. They would not talk castle secrets to Kreacher. Kreacher had to lie like Mistress had taught him to get anywhere."

"What did you find out?"

"Male elves would trigger alarms if they didn't bypass them too."

"Really?"

"Snake boy will do what house elves do. Kreacher was told that to climb or fly over the stairs is impossible. To go over them one must walk on the railing. Kreacher asked how to do that without falling and Goobee, an intolerable excuse for an elf as my Mistress would say, said to use sticking charm on feet."

Harry nodded, relieved. "Sound simple enough. What about the doors?"

"Goobee told Kreacher that to get past those snake boy would have to perform a virtually painless temporary castration curse."

"Oh hell no!" Harry said, cringing, ignoring the annoyed looks thrown at him by the others in the common room.

"Kreacher thought as much, so Goobee told him how to confuse the wards by transfiguring into a pet animal."

"Like a cat?" Harry asked, remembering Crookshanks and concluding that the cat's status as a pet must have been why the cat didn't set off the alarms while the house elves would.

Kreacher nodded his head vigorously.

"Good," Harry said. "You did good, Kreacher. Tell your Mistress thank you for all her help and that I will destroy the wretched thing tonight."

Kreacher swallowed, looking like he was choking down something rather nasty. "Good luck, snake boy," he managed to say through clenched teeth.

Startled, Harry looked in disbelief to the little elf. Kreacher just shuddered and popped away. Now all Harry had to do was wait for the early hours of morning when all would be dead asleep to the world. It would be a long night.

--

A quiet, disillusioned Harry pressed his ear against the Headgirl's suite at four in the morning and held his breath. He heard nothing. Taking a steadying breath, he closed his eyes, picturing the toad he was about to transform himself into when Crookshanks padded into view from the seventh year girls' dormitory, which connected to the Headgirl's rooms through a shared bathroom. Harry kept his wand pointed at his chest and held his breath awaiting the little beast's reaction.

Crookshanks opened his mouth letting out a surprisingly silent yowl. Harry thanked his lucky stars even as the little mongrel stalked towards him. He leapt in surprise when the orange furball rubbed against his legs in a friendly manner. How did the cat sense--oh smell.

Harry shooed the half-Kneazle out of the way and performed the complicated movement that accompanied all human transfiguration and silently thought the words, *humanus transfigura bufo*. As he shrunk and changed form, Harry held the picture of the toad firmly in his mind until after the whole transformation took place.

He opened his eyes and took stock only to find the bloody orange monstrosity looking even bigger than he last remembered. A croak of fear escaped Harry and he jumped several feet away in the opposite direction before he could gain control of his automatic reflexes. After a rather ungraceful leap Harry managed to will himself to turn around and rejoin the ghastly creature; it was difficult but he managed to get back to where he first started.

Crookshanks lifted a paw and Harry leapt to the door avoiding the meaty harbinger of doom. He croaked in warning to the half-Kneazle and squeezed himself under the door jamb into her rooms. Harry breathed out a small little croak as his toad body returned to its normal shape.

He looked around trying to gain stock of her room, but being so small made the furniture impossibly large to navigate. Harry closed his eyes and thought the reverse, *bufo transfigura humanus*, keeping his human form forefront of his mind. With speedy ease he shot up from the ground. Harry looked down at his hands checking them for any

toadly residue, fingering his wand loosely before turning his gaze back up.

Tom Riddle lounged on his side, gently kissing a sleeping Hermione. His hand curled in her tangled hair, ghostly and pale. From her lips something white and pure flowed and Riddle was consuming it greedily. It took Harry a moment to put together what he was seeing.

"GET THE FUCK AWAY FROM HER!" Harry yelled in shock, whipping his wand forward onto the ghostly spectral of the twenty-something Voldemort, desperately trying to remember what he had to do.

Tom lifted his head from the kiss he had been giving Hermione. The trail of pearly white thinned and broke, seeping back into Hermione who took a deep breath her whole body shuddering. He removed his hand from her hair and in a mockery of affection ran it gently down the side of her pale cheek.

"Why would I ever want to get away from such a lovely creature?" he purred, the deep suave bed voice at such odds to the high hissing quality Harry had always heard before.

"If you've hurt her I'll kill you, Voldemort! I will destroy you!" Harry vowed, sending the two curses back to back, "Annullo Pravus! Avedo Kaodavrea!"

They flew through Voldemort's body and hit the wall; he leered. "Is that the best you could do?" he asked, his handsome features contorting into an evil sneer.

Harry's eyes widened as he took a step backward. Voldemort pulled himself from his sprawled position onto the other side of the bed; Hermione lay there between them deathly pale. She moaned, turning her head weakly, her body shifting restlessly.

"You're too late," he chuckled sinisterly. "In just a few moments, Hermione Granger will be gone. Don't fret, she'll have died for a good cause."

"You bastard," Harry growled, running to the bed and grabbing Hermione's hand.

It was ice cold, her flushed skin was paling, growing icy blue. In desperation he searched her face for some sign of life, but even her thrashing stilled. He shook her.

"That won't work," Riddle whispered in Harry's ear, laughing darkly.

"Come on Hermione! Wake up!" Harry yelled, shaking her roughly. Her head fell to the side, revealing the locket chain.

He dropped her hand and grabbed the chain. Voldemort lunged across the bed, yelling hoarsely. Harry jerked the chain, breaking the thin connection. Locket in hand, Harry backed away from the bed. Voldemort crawled across the mattress, going straight through Hermione who gasped allowed.

"Give that back," Voldemort demanded, stretching out his hand for the locket.

"You can't harm her if I am holding it," Harry said, holding the Horcrux out of reach.

Voldemort pulled a wand from his robes and aim it at Harry. "You will return the locket to me if you know what's good for you boy."

"Right," Harry sneered, raising his wand, challenging, "Try me."

"I don't want to harm you, Harry Potter," Voldemort tried again, edging closer. "I would rather us be allies."

Harry scoffed, "You obviously don't know me very well."

"I believe I know you better than most anyone, Harry," Voldemort said, looking back at Hermione's prone figure. "After all who's the closest person to you, but our dear Hermione? I've been inside her mind; I know all about you. I know you've lied to her and that you've hidden things from her. I know that Daniel uses you for his own gain. I know you're the twin with the true power. I know you think you don't need anyone, Harry, but you need me."

"I need you like Veelas need a makeover."

"You should see them in their bird form," Voldemort replied, waving the wand confidently. "Expelliarmus."

Harry felt the Horcrux jerk in his hand, but a silent shield charm kept it firmly in his grasp. "Those spells should have worked," he said aloud. "Why didn't they?"

"Because," Voldemort said with vanity, "the locket is one of my more clever ideas. I modified the charms used. I wasn't sure they would work as I needed them to, but your little curses proved ineffectual against my superior mind. I knew I could have always been a Ravenclaw."

"A Ravenclaw values knowledge over all things, including power," Harry commented, running a list of spells that worked against ghosts and poltergeists in his head. "You're too power hungry to ever be considered a Raven."

"Knowledge is power!" Voldemort thundered. "Or are you too brainless to understand?"

"He's not brainless," Myrtle replied, slipping up through the floor. She adjusted her glasses, peering owlshly at Voldemort. "Hello again, Tom."

"Myrtle Cupressus," Riddle said disquieted. "The girl who died during the attacks of Hagrid's beast."

Myrtle grinned widely. "I remember you too Tom Riddle. Prefect, soon-to-be Headboy--my true killer."

"I heard you became a ghost," he said, ignoring Harry who was sidling closer to Hermione to check on her breathing once again.

She was breathing shallower. Harry snuck a glance at Voldemort who was growing more solid in presence before looking at his closed fist. He tightened his hand, the metal of the locket humming in warning. Voldemort met Harry's gaze when he looked up.

"Don't try anything stupid, Potter," he called jeeringly. "You're nothing without me."

"That could be the other way around," Myrtle trilled lightly, a gleeful expression lighting her usually dour face. "After all Tom, you seem to have thrived more on his competition than you ever did on your own."

"And what would you know Cupressus?" Tom said, shifting his grip on his wand as Harry jabbed his fingernails into the crease of the heart trying to pry it open. "You always were an ugly fat crybaby."

Myrtle drifted closer to Voldemort, circling him. He warily shied away, keeping her in front of him at all times. The girl ghost stopped when she was between Riddle and Harry and smiled sardonically.

"Perhaps," she replied, "but I would rather be Miserable Moping Moaning Myrtle than Tom Riddle the One-Who-Must-Be-Hyphenated."

"How dare you mock me!" Riddle shouted, throwing a dispelling jinx her way. It sailed through her and hit the wall, which groaned ominously on contact.

Myrtle tisked. "Why I do believe your wand is not up for the task there, Riddle."

In anger Riddle threw a series of curses, Harry had to duck two. He pulled Hermione off the bed, cradling her against his chest. While Myrtle kept Voldemort distracted, Harry was working on opening the Horcrux. He scratched and pulled, plucked and pried.

The metal grew hot, hotter than Harry could stand without pain. He gritted his teeth, throwing a glance up at Myrtle's fight with Voldemort. Colored lights of spells cast from Voldemort were expending themselves all along the wall above him. Returning his attention to the locket Harry cursed his lack of information. If only he knew what trickery Voldemort had applied then he could think of a way around it.

He tried unlocking spells, tapping the locket with each new one he came up with. His finger blistered. Harry could feel his flesh searing

to the metal and dropped it onto the floor beside him. He gathered his robe sleeve around his hand and plucked it up again.

"Ah!" Myrtle cried out, Harry's circumventing jinx he had placed on her down in the bathroom hours earlier finally failing her as an orange hex hit her.

Myrtle dodged Voldemort's next curse, but her movement caused Riddle to laugh out loud. His bedroom voice gone replaced by his usual hissing intonation. Inspiration hit Harry like a bludger, fast and hard.

§Open,§ he hissed under his breath.

Twin snakes, not unlike Celestial Gaunt's Adæmus and Oglethorp, shimmered into view, their slithering engraved bodies entwining into an elaborate double 'S'.

§Who seeks us?§ one asked.

§I do. I demand that you open for me.§

§You are not the young Tom Riddle,§ said the other, peering up at him through squinted eyes. §Who are you?§

§Tom's my dad,§ Harry lied, refusing to glance up.

§I remember Tom,§ said the second one shrewdly. §He was a very isolated young man, valuing his privacy above all--§

Harry interjected swiftly, §He said to tell you he goes by Voldemort now. That his plans for immortality are successful.§

§Right,§ said the first one skeptically, but they opened up, releasing the latch with a whispered hiss.

A folded note sprung out, falling gently to the floor.

§Imagine, a silly little locket,§ Voldemort hissed scathingly, appearing in front of Harry, having overheard the hissing conversation. §In the hands of a silly little girl.§

Riddle knocked the locket out of Harry's hand, his touch substantial--solid, scaring Harry. Hermione had to be near death if Voldemort was nearly completely corporeal.

"No!" Harry denied, clutching Hermione to him with one hand and battling Voldemort for the locket with the other. "Let her go! Let her go, damn it!"

"It's over Harry," Voldemort intoned sinisterly, jerking the Horcrux by its chain up off the floor.

"I'm sorry Harry!" Myrtle cried out from the ceiling where she was stuck.

"I won't give up!" Harry vowed, throwing the weeping ghost a stern look. "Neither will you! It's not over yet!"

"Oh, but it is. It is."

§No, it's not. While she still breathes, I'm not giving up on her!§

§How noble. I swear you must have been a Gryffindor in a past life.§

§Gryffindor--that's it!§ Harry shouted, adjusting Hermione's lifeless body, pointing his wand at Voldemort. §Bravery against cowardice; honor against ignominy; love against hate; life and death! A Horcrux is the ultimate perversion using death to secure life! Opposites! It's all about opposites!§

§What are you on about?§ Voldemort asked, scowling. §You're wasting my time. I'm going to kill you Harry Potter. I'm going to kill you slowly. Then I'm going to frame you for her death. You talk about disgrace and contempt. Those things shall haunt the memory of you forever.§

§Heart of Ice§ Harry shouted, calling upon his magic to push it through.

A dozen blooming marigold flowers fell from the ceiling, sprinkling the floor around them, each clinking lightly as their frozen petals touched. Harry called one to him as Voldemort chortled.

§A flower? A dozen icy flowers? What good will that do you?§ he asked, slashing his wand downward as Harry banished the flower into the locket, "Avada--"

§Die! Close!§ he shouted as Riddle yelled, "Keda--"

Myrtle flew in front of Harry holding her arms akimbo shrieking in terror as the last syllable was said and the killing curse flew into her spectral form. She wailed loudly and evaporated just as the locket closed at Harry's command, the dead flower trapped within, symbolizing the death of love. Voldemort screamed in agony, his face charring even as the golden Horcrux blackened.

Together soul and Horcrux burnt to ashes, Harry held his breath, watching the eradication with barely suppressed hope. With the obliteration of the Horcrux, a pure white ethereal light remained hovering above the exhausted couple. Slowly with purpose, the light seeped into Hermione. Her body arched in a spasm of relief, her eyelids fluttering wildly as she took her first deep easy breath in who knew how long. Her whole body relaxed, falling peacefully into his arms and Harry let out a happy relieved laugh, as her breathing evened out into that of sleep.

He buried his face into her hair, his whole body shuddering in thanksgiving as he cried softly, "I love you, I love you, I love you."

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 31°«««°»»»°

Chapter 32

Harry was just setting Hermione down on her bed when the door burst open and three professors came in; wands held aloft. Professor Dumbledore swept the scene with his steely gaze, looking more like the slayer of Grindelwald than the kindly Headmaster. McGonagall flanked his left hand side and gave Harry a stern glare, while Flitwick, as Head of House and former dueling champion stood dwarfed on Dumbledore's right. Harry smoothed the comforter down over Hermione before stepping back.

"Mr. Potter," Dumbledore said indicating with his wand. "Hand over your wand."

"Just what on earth did you think you were doing?" McGonagall snapped as Harry handed his holly and phoenix feather wand over to the Headmaster.

"Why doing was Professor Dumbledore said for me to do," Harry retorted. "You'll find, Headmaster," he said turning away from McGonagall. "That your Headgirl will be drastically improving to her old state."

Dumbledore frowned and cast *prior incantato* at his wand. Two ghastly hissing spells erupted from the tip of his wand. Harry remembered the urgency and power he put behind those parseltongue killing and locking spells. For only a few minutes ago it seemed like ages. Riddle had been finalizing the killing curse and only Myrtle's intervention had kept him alive.

"What is this?" Flitwick asked startled as a third hissing spell released translucent insubstantial fig marigolds. "Mr. Potter are you a Parselmouth?"

"Yes," Harry replied nonchalantly. "No, I wasn't the heir of Slytherin before you ask, but I was able to open the sink in the girls' bathroom. I'm sure Dumbledore can tell you exactly what happened between myself, my brother, Ron and Ginny Weasley in the Chamber."

Flitwick looked in askance towards the Headmaster who simply murmured, "Later Filius."

A fourth Parseltounge spell left the wand as an unlocked locket followed by series of five different Latin unsuccessful unlocking charms. Then a silent shield charm and then nothing. Dumbledore tried to put more power into the wand to reveal a few more spells but ten spells was the limit that the charm could do. The Headmaster handed the wand reluctantly back to Harry.

"Tell me what happened, Mr. Potter," Dumbledore requested.

Harry feigned a look of surprise. "Who me? Surely Daniel's story of what happened would better serve you, Professor," he mocked.

"Do not speak to the Headmaster in that tone," McGonagall snapped, angrily motioning with her wand.

Dumbledore cleared his throat, gently pushing McGonagall's wand down. Disgruntled, she put it away and settled back into staring down her nose primly. Flitwick followed form as repeated the Headmaster's request for an explanation.

"The Headmaster pointed out just how far gone our Hermione was going. Her grades were dropping and it couldn't all be blamed on her dating my brother or lack of sleep. Everything was suspicious to me from the start, but with the threat of expulsion on my head I had to get to the bottom of it or be blamed unceremoniously for it."

"Professor?" Flitwick asked, shooting the Headmaster a glance. "You threatened Mr. Potter for Miss Granger's falling performance?"

Dumbledore had the grace to look embarrassed. "I thought he was behind the string of new and cruel pranks plaguing Mr. Potter and Miss Granger. As Harry had been dating Miss Granger before that I assumed it was him acting rashly and jealously to the situation."

"Quite," Harry retorted coldly, ignoring the fact that it was true at the time.

"Go on, Harry," Flitwick encourage lightly.

"The Headgirl was not acting under her own influence. Daniel sent her a charmed locket giving it to her underhandedly, using my owl

and signing my name. The locket was a artifact of Tom Riddle's, so on top of Riddle's charms were Daniel's compulsion charms. Hermione only started to date him under the influence of wearing the blasted jewelry piece. I've destroyed it and right now she is sleeping. Madam Promfrey might want to come in and see her. I'm staying until she awakes."

--

Harry watched her sleep, not touching her. Looking at her caused his heart to ache and bitter reminders of the past two months to well up. He loved her in spite of everything, but he did not know if he could forget or forgive.

Everything felt so unreal to him now. The relief he felt at her survival diminished under the new weight placed on his mind. Where could they go from here? Harry didn't know. He didn't have answers. He was hollow, as if every part of him had been drained dry.

Dawn was breaking through the tower windows, basking the room in pale gray. It fit his somber reflections as he watched and waited. The light only seemed to make Hermione more lovely. Her frizzy hair, unchecked against the white of the pillows, looked warm and alive. Her pale cheeks had a rosy flush and the dark circles under her eyes only made her more delicate and fragile. Her dusky-rose lips parted sweetly in her slumber.

He longed to touch her, to reclaim her as his own, but even as the light was driving away the shadows, it reminded him of the harshness he had had to face. He remembered how lonely his days had been and lonelier still the nights. Harry tried to hold Luna's words in his heart, to look forward instead of remembering the past, but the image of Daniel touching his Hermione made him sick with dread.

Now it was over, the duplicity of the Horcrux was revealed and subsequently destroyed, Harry couldn't help but wonder just how far it had gone. The enchantments of the locket were not unlike the diary, which if he recalled, Ginny said grew tougher to fight the more she wrote in it. Perhaps, the same could be said for Hermione for the longer she wore it, and Hermione must have worn it continuously.

It wasn't fair of him to ask of her the strength to overcome the compulsions of the darkest and most vile warlock since Grindelwald. He knew it in his mind, but his heart couldn't help but wish she had been able to--to fight a little harder. Harry hung his head, wishing he could stop thinking all together because then maybe it would hurt less.

A flutter of wings broke the silence of the suite as Hedwig soared into the room, landing lightly on Harry's knee. The tiny pricks of her talons roused Harry from his reflections and he dug his hand into his pocket pulling out the folded letter that had started this mess. He unfolded it and carefully smoothed it out.

"How girl, did you not immediately know the difference?" he asked, showing her the scrawled text. "I know you could not read the words as it was rolled up, but the spell residue had to have been there to hide his aura and the handwriting."

Hedwig hooted mortified. She clicked her beak regularly, ruffling her wings in agitation.

"I know. Believe me I know," he sighed. "Daniel never tried something so underhanded before and you were out when he came through my wards and I was out when you came back and saw the letter. You had no reason to think it wasn't from me, but I wish you had waited. What a difference that would have made."

Hedwig hooted mournfully and Harry nodded, ripping up the appalling excuse for a love letter. The shredded pieces drifted to the floor between his feet. Hedwig nudged his arm with her head, nudging it again when he didn't look up. She chattered at him indignantly until he calmed her with a hand on her head and stroke of her feathers.

"Don't worry. I still think you're the smartest most wonderful of owls. We'll know better in case of a next time." His expression darkened, his eyes flashing brightly. "There won't be a next time," he said darkly. "We have everything do we not? Of Daniel's duplicity and crime against another student--the Headgirl no less?"

Hedwig clicked her beak, flying off his knee and onto the floor. She picked up a torn piece of the letter Harry had ripped. He smiled grimly and waved his wand silently. The pieces knitted themselves back

together, reforming the love note. Harry pocketed it, and called to him the smoldering remains of the Horcrux. He bagged the ashes and placed the clear bag into his pocket with the letter. With proof and Hermione's recollection of the events as she knew them, Daniel would be toast. There would be no wriggle room for the flubberworm when he gave Dumbledore the evidence to support his earlier story.

He reflected then on the battle with Voldemort's soul and his conversation with Myrtle right before. She had had to fight back against the boy who rid her of her life, not Olive Hornby who had made a ruin of it while living. He gave her the opportunity with the expressed hope she would help him.

She did and in that same bathroom all those years ago when she had found him as a young crying eleven year old Myrtle had confessed to Harry that she loved him as well as any ghost could. He thought he would have been horrified upon hearing that but a part of him was grateful for the pureness of her offering. While he couldn't tell her he felt the same, because he didn't, he did tell her she was one of the truest and most loyal of friends; he was glad to have her by his side.

Now Myrtle was gone, another friend lost to the battle against Voldemort and his Horcruxes. Harry wondered just how many more were going to have to die. Fighting the evil wizard when he was younger hadn't had nearly so many permanent deaths--just some particularly serious mishaps that landed him in the hospital. He looked over again at Hermione, that especially nauseous feeling welling up inside him once more. It could have been her. That was a risk he wasn't willing to take again.

Hedwig chattered at him and took flight, circling the room and managing a spot for herself one top of the bedpost. Harry glanced up at her curiously before his attention was called back down at a slight snuffling noise. He found himself out of his seat and on the bed just seconds before her eyes fluttered open. She gave him a tiny half smile that was almost immediately replaced by a moue of consternation which turned into a horrified gasp.

"Harry?" she asked tremulously, extending a shaking hand in his direction.

He took her hand, held it loosely in his, observing her. Tears glistened on her lashes and he found a few of the shattered pieces of his heart. "How are you feeling?"

She wet her lips, her free hand touching her temple absently. "I feel woozy," she told him, dropping her hand. "I think," she puzzled aloud, "I think that Vv-Voldemort possessed me." She gave him a look then and said earnestly, "I wasn't myself, Harry."

"Can you tell me what happened?" he invited, needing to know.

Hermione pulled her hand back and ran them nervously over the bedspread. Her gaze focused over his right shoulder as she sorted through the double memories and overlapping thoughts.

"Hedwig delivered the locket to me about midway through the break. I was ecstatic that you had sent your present to me early, as I had done for you. I remember opening the letter with giddiness and reading what you wrote--it was so romantic--I took the locket out of the pouch and put it on immediately..." she paused, worrying her lip back and forth between her teeth. "You didn't give me the locket did you? Or the note?"

Harry shook his head and leant back toward the chair he'd been sitting at previously and pluck up a small brown package. "I got you this. I found the locket at Uncle Sirius' place with the help of the house elf. My room was broken into Christmas Eve when I was downstairs. Hedwig found the letter addressed to you after she got back from her hunt and without a reason to suspect otherwise she took it to you thinking it was my present for you. And how could you find that letter appealing it was so appalling awful?"

"I--" she floundered helplessly. "I--"

"Never mind," he interrupted. "What happened next? Can you recall?"

"I started having brownouts. My parents thought it was because of the heat. We're just not use to it here in England--the hot suns of India." Hermione shook her head, and restlessly picked at a sagging thread on the bedspread. "Then one day I woke up with a voice in my head."

"Voldemort."

Hermione looked up at him then, meeting his eyes. Tears leaked from the corners of her own and she snuffled loudly. "Yes. He was frightful, Harry. The first day I laid there in bed struggling against him. He stopped me from telling my parents when they came to check up on me what was happening and they left me alone thinking I was sick. I stopped him however from making me move or speak any of the nasty things he wanted me to..."

"What changed?"

She shook her head mutely, her hair falling in front of her face, hiding her from him. He reached out, sweeping back the bushy locks grazing her cheek accidentally. He pulled back as if burned. The tingle of awareness remained with him though and he resisted the urge to wipe his hand against his leg.

"Hermione?"

She took a deep fortifying breath and let it out shakily. "He won. I think I grew tired and fell asleep, though it felt like hours even days that I had been up struggling against his will. The next day he was having me tell my parents it had been a bug and that I was fine. I wasn't though and I couldn't tell them. I couldn't tell them, Harry!"

He ached to comfort her, but he stayed where he was beside her. Fresh tears were squeezed out as her face grew blotchy and red. He desperately wanted to give into his desire to offer her reassurance. Instead he settled for clutching her hand and giving her a small squeeze.

"Then he started pulling at my memories, sinking into what made me who I was to easily fool others and he found Daniel and what I thought of him before this year and before I knew it I was writing love letters to him and telling him that dating you was all this master plan to get near him.

"He seemed to like that pretty well and wrote me in a letter not to write or speak with you anymore not that Voldemort would have let me..." she broke down sobbing into her hands. "Th-that day on the

train... the look on your face... it'll haunt me forever Harry. I wanted to push away from Daniel, beat him up, run to you, anything, anything! But I was trapped--trapped inside of myself and nothing--nothing could break his hold on me."

Harry smiled bitterly. "Me too," he said softly. "And all the times after that I found you with him in broom cupboards."

She pulled her hand away from him and wrapped her arms around her knees, hiding her face against them. Her whole body shook. "I felt so dirty, Harry."

"That's something I don't get--why all the--that--with Daniel? Why did Voldemort... make you do that?"

She hiccupped. "Because the more romantically involved I was with the person who sent me the locket, the more control he gained over me, and the closer he was to his final goal. I was dying inside... fading away into nothing..."

He wrapped his arms around her then, unable to help himself and clutched her to him. She unwound her tightly curled body and threw herself against him wracking sobs pouring from her, soaking his robes. He rocked her a little, closing his eyes against her pain.

"How far?" he croaked his emotions raw like hers. He couldn't bear the thought of his brother touching her like he had. The idea only made him want to curse something into oblivion.

Hermione buried her face deeper into his shoulder. "He touched me; he touched me and I was forced to moan like it was something I wanted instead of making my skin crawl... he..."

Harry felt his insides twist. It was true then, the worst thing imaginable had happened. He was going to tear his brother apart; rip him limb from limb.

He tried to speak and had to clear his throat. "You're saying you and Daniel slept together?" he asked, desperately needing her to deny the inevitable.

"NO!" she cried out fiercely, pulling back, her watery brown eyes reflecting back up to him. "Voldemort learned early on I came back with a vengeance when he tried. He stopped trying to make it happen the way he wanted it too."

"But how? You said--"

"I didn't sleep with Daniel," she said fervently. "I couldn't. I loved you too strongly for Voldemort to push me to that final barrier. Instead he made me do other things..." she grew meeker again and turned away from him. "Those things I couldn't stop. I tried but... he was stronger and I--"

"Stop," he commanded, feeling nauseated, perversely needing to know what happened in detail, but he couldn't stomach anymore. He couldn't handle it now and neither could she. He touched her shoulder. "Stop. Please. No more. I can't listen to anymore."

"Harry..." Hermione pleaded, facing him again, touching his knee. "You believe me don't you?"

"Yes," he whispered, desperately shoving the wounded feeling aside. "I don't blame you... not anymore... how can I?" he shook his head. "But I can't help it if all I see is you and him together... and feel the betrayal all over again."

"Harry," she pleaded, "Harry, I love you."

"It physically hurt me to see you with him," Harry told her, brushing a stray lock of her hair behind her ear, in a gesture so tenderly familiar and yet foreign to him. "I--I care for you deeply. I'm sorry the locket was ever sent to you."

"Harry--"

He pressed a finger against her lips. "Please," he begged, "let me finish. I want us to be together like before, but I know it can't be that way. It'll never be like it was before. We've changed. I thought you had betrayed me like everyone else. I've never been so out of sorts. I'm not ready yet. I can't forget everything that went on. I need time to sort myself out before we can try this again."

"Harry," Hermione cried out softly, leaning into him. "Don't leave me. Please, please, I need you."

"Likewise," he answered steadily, "but I need space too. Give me time, Hermione."

"I won't survive this without you!"

He sighed sadly. "Somehow I think you'll find a way. You're strong; stronger than you think. We both need to heal."

"We can heal each other!"

He shook his head. "I can't see how. I don't want to hurt you, it's the last thing I want to do, but I need to think of myself first, just for now."

"Can't we try first?" she entreated, clutching at his forearms, her eyes wild and desperate.

"Hermione--"

"Don't do this, don't walk away. We can make it work! I know we can!"

He looked away, over her shoulder, trying to steel himself against the turmoil that rose inside of him at her words.

"Kiss me, Harry," she implored. "Love me. Let yourself love me."

Involuntarily, he cupped her face, his gaze sweeping over her large soft brown eyes down to her sweet honeyed lips. Her lashes fluttered down as he leaned in to taste them. A hair's breadth away he paused holding still as emotion swept him; then in the selfsame movement he pulled back.

She opened her eyes and he saw a deep hurt reflecting in them nearly equaling the heartsore feeling building inside his chest. He smoothed his hands down her arms and squeezed her fingers, feeling the icy coldness of them, at once certain and unsure.

"I can't do this," Harry murmured, letting go of her. "I'm sorry; I just can't."

He removed himself from the bed and walked to the door. She called his name as he reached it in desperation. Reluctantly he paused, a part of himself wanting a sign that he was wrong, that they could be as they were. Hermione bit her lip and said nothing and he offered up a sad smile before departing. Hedwig fluttered after him hooting a sorrow filled farewell to Hermione.

There was nothing left to say.

°«««°»»°End Chapter 32°«««°»»°

Chapter 33

"Wait a little longer," a sweet melodic voice sang cheerfully from behind him. "Fortune favors you after your charms lesson."

She'd been saying things like that since he left Hermione alone in her suite early yesterday morning. He had a sneaking suspicion she knew about the Horcrux fight, especially when she had said, 'I see that the seven plovers of ill omen have dwindled down to three. You have knocked four out of flight,' but then Luna would talk about pufftails and thwartpogs and he'd be reassured that she was simply speaking nonsense, albeit, disturbingly familiar nonsense. Nevertheless he had steered clear of a confrontation with Daniel or a second one with Hermione or Dumbledore, on the off chance the pretty Ravenclaw was right.

Luna sat down next to him on the couch and pulled out her homework from her book bag. A discrete side glance revealed it was Divination. He mentally snorted as Luna flipped it upside down and began writing from the bottom and building up.

"Luna," he said patiently, placing his quill down beside his Defense Against the Dark Arts essay. "You do realize that what you're writing will be illegible to Professor Trelawney. You're going to be deducted marks."

Luna smiled genially and sucked on the end of her sugar quill. "Is that so? Hmm...well I foresaw full marks if I did it this way. I'm sure Seer Sybil will agree; after all how can one unblock the inner eye if we continually follow routine?"

Harry considered her statement, "Perhaps your reasoning is valid," Harry reluctantly said, shaking his head.

"I only see you when I don't follow routine," she commented absently, scratching at her scroll. "So I must be careful now that we're friends to have a routine I never follow without the absence of routine becoming routine. It's a little tricky, but patterning my behavior after that of the hoofhorn stompers seems to help me navigate all the murky waters. It would be a nightmare trying to find you again. You need me now more than ever. I wouldn't want you to become lost."

Harry arched a brow. "Right. I should leave the hoofhorn stompers to it then. I wouldn't want to get involved, because knowing me I would make me lose myself."

"Don't be silly," Luna said lightly. "You're over by the fireplace."

Out of curiosity Harry looked over by the fireplace and saw, nestled in the darkest corner in the shabbiest of chairs, a huddled figure. He felt his pulse quicken at the sight of her. She must have just come into the common room; because he had missed her earlier.

Hermione was reading for Professor Flitwick. He could tell because she was absentmindedly moving a finger around; mimicking wand movements, a habit he was very familiar with and, at one time, thought endearing.

He missed her. It'd only been a day. Harry had found himself meandering abandoned hallways trying to find excuses to keep staying away from her. It was harder to stay away from her than he had thought it would be.

As he watched her, Hermione glanced up from her pages and their eyes met. A fission of heat passed between them. He blinked and it was gone. She was back to studying and he was back to staring at her with all the bewilderment and befuddlement he'd been experiencing since the locket was destroyed. He was torn and he knew it.

"It's all right," Luna interrupted, placing a light and sympathetic hand on his knee before returning to her scribbling. "You'll find your way back sooner or later."

"Is that so?" he asked bemusedly, returning himself to his own essay about toads, basilisks, and roosters. It was the only thing that could keep his mind occupied long enough to forget his troubles.

Basilisks were highly intriguing to him and he had delved into the researching of them; checking out a dozen or so books from the library. Clearly, the subject held his fascination. Of course having killed one in second year and the ability to become one had a lot to do with his current absorption in the task. Professor Hobday would be

hard pressed not to be impressed with the in-depth detail and extra two feet of writing. He still wasn't done!

Luna sighed dreamily, and looked out the window. Harry glanced up from his paragraph to drink in her countenance. She had a far away expression that made him smile briefly before returning to work. N.E.W.T.S. were coming up and the seventh years were finally starting to show signs of stress. He was determined to stay on top of his workload if at all possible.

He glanced up over toward Hermione again. She was going to be severely frazzled and strained under the course load. Not only did she have to do the current projects, essays, tests, and what naught that he had to do, but she had another six classes on top of that and previous work she would be determined to go over again on her own from the start of term.

He glanced down at his bag and saw the copies of his notes he had made. Should he give them to her?

Hermione's shoulders slumped and she closed the book with a dismayed snap. That settled it for Harry, he stood up taking the notes with him and crossed the common room. She glanced up startled, her mouth hanging open. Suddenly Harry felt his nerves twitch.

"You're going to need them," he offered quietly, holding out the packet of pages and duplicate scrolls. "I'm afraid they're not up to my usual standards. I was rather er... distracted at the time."

She took them slowly, her eyes on his and sheepishly tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Thank you, Harry," she whispered softly.

Harry nodded. "They're at least better than--"

"Nothing, which is what I have," she murmured, clutching the bundle to her. Her eyes tried to communicate something to him, but he looked away and awkwardly ran his hand through his hair. "He does that a lot," she said, observing him somberly.

"Er?"

"Daniel; running his hand through his hair," she clarified, looking toward the fire. "He tries to make it look more windswept and Quidditch-afied. He thinks it's cool."

Harry pulled his hand down. "Right," he said stiffly. "I'd better be going. I'm glad I could help."

"Harry--" Hermione entreated, looking horrified. She reached out to him.

He looked back at her, his expression full of suppressed anger, and she withdrew. He turned away and walked back to Luna, feeling Hermione's eyes burn into him. He didn't dare look back as fury bubbled through him once more. The low simmering boil that churned under the surface flared to life as he sat back down.

Luna looked at him questionably as he huffed loudly. She touched his knee. "Tomorrow after charms."

"Yeah?" he managed to bite out, feeling ruthless and directed for the first time since yesterday.

"To go after your brother," she stated simply, for perhaps the first time since they had become friends.

He said nothing as he turned her words over in his mind and finally he asked, "How do you know?"

"Because I'm Loony Luna."

"That explains much," he said dryly.

"Yes," she agreed happily, returning to her upside-down mirror writing. "It does."

--

The next day Harry went to the first of his Monday classes, with his completed basilisk essay in hand. The Defense Against the Dark Arts room was in a topsy-turvy uproar once again, bouncing far and wide through the castle. The two months after the start of term were not

enough to settle the classroom down. Harry followed his point me spell, up and down through halls and staircases, occasionally taking a side passageway to avoid the gaggle of Slytherins or Ravenclaws frantically looking for the classroom.

Harry was the first to arrive and he set his bag down on the nearest desk and slid into his seat. Professor Hobday was talking quietly to himself up by the blackboard and would write invisible things on it occasionally. Harry took out his scroll and set it down at the edge of his desk. Just then Draco Malfoy and his gang strutted through the double doors talking loudly drawing both his and Professor Hobday's attention.

"Can you believe the look on that filthy mud--" Draco shot Professor Hobday a look before clearing his throat. "Hermione's face back there? I thought she was going to cry!"

The two buffoons with only half of a brain between them guffawed heartily as they sank into their seats on either side of Malfoy. Harry watched him with narrowed eyes, struggling to squash a protective feeling that surged through him at the slimy git's words. Malfoy tilted his chair backwards and crossed his feet on the desk in front of him.

"I bet Daniel's no good in the sack, goodness knows those two were trying to do each other in every broom cupboard in the castle. It's only because they're Heads that they didn't get detention. Royally unfair if you ask me, they should have been tossed out on their rears."

Goyle or was it Crabbe grunted something and Draco laughed maliciously.

"Yeah," he said in his high nasally voice, "I wonder what the next prank on them is going to be. That person should be rewarded for the sheer genius of their work. Special Services to the school for that one. Doing us all a favor he was."

"Why don't you do us all a favor and shut the hell up," Harry drawled.

"Potty," Draco exclaimed unsurprised. "You should know better than to interrupt your betters."

"Hmm," Harry said noncommittally.

"What was that?" Draco demanded, his eye narrowing.

"Nothing," Harry said, taking pause for effect, "Dray."

Draco's face went purple just in time for the class to start. Professor Hobday called those who were in attendance to pay attention. It was quite a pitiful group of them with only a quarter of the classroom filled with students. Stragglers kept coming through the doorway looking sheepish as they slid into their desks.

Hermione came in with one of the groups of Slytherins, a boy held the door open for her. She looked surprised but quickly shuffled past them to one of the open desks. Harry watched her walk by and caught a scent of her light flowery perfume. He closed his eyes against a wash of desire and told himself firmly to forget about it. He needed time and space to sort everything out.

Hobday tapped the board and the invisible writing he wrote earlier appeared. There was a picture of a rooster killing a basilisk, its head thrown back in a crow. Harry stared at the basilisk as it moved and writhed around on the board, perpetually dying. He wondered if that could happen to him. Would he always have to worry about roosters now?

"Today we're going to have a little pop quiz, class. If you all did your research properly for this last essay you should have no problems. Please put your scrolls, parchment, and other belongings away and we'll start."

The class scrambled to do so. Some, like Draco and Hermione, looked green at the thought of this impromptu quiz. Harry grinned, sure that this would be entirely too easy.

"First question: What creature lists the basilisk as its mortal enemy?"

Harry raised his hand lazily with a few other students. Hobday gestured to Terry Boot.

"The spider, sir."

“Excellent. Five points to Ravenclaw. Second question: Give me one difference between the male and female basilisk.”

Harry raised his hand again along with half the class. Hobday picked Draco in the back.

“By the red plume on the adult male’s head.”

“Good. Good. Five points to Slytherin. Now another difference. Miss Davis.”

Tracey looked up startled. She sweated for a minute racking her brain. “Uh... by their eye color?” Hobday gave her an encouraging nod as she struggled to finish it. “The females have green eyes and the males yellow?”

“Incorrect, but close. Two points from Slytherin. Miss Li, how about you?”

“The eye color is reversed, sir. The males have green eyes and the female yellow.”

“Quite correct. Three points to Ravenclaw. How is the basilisk like a normal snake, Miss Patil?”

“They shed their skin as they grow, Professor.”

“Excellent. Well done. Five points to Ravenclaw. Mr. Goyle, tell me, how is a basilisk not unlike a dragon?”

Goyle grunted, shooting a glance at Malfoy before clearing his throat rather noisily. “Tough skin?” he murmured dumbly.

Hobday smiled. “Yes. The skin of a basilisk can deflect a numbered amount of spells. Of course getting basilisk hide to make armor is a bit difficult. Five points to Slytherin. This next one is an easy one. Who is the last person known to have slain a basilisk? I’ll give you a hint: it happened right here at Hogwarts five years ago.”

Harry raised his hand defiantly, making a coughing noise. Hobday called on him.

"Harry Potter," he growled out, causing the Slytherins to snicker loudly. Draco in particular was having a time of it.

Hobday's expression darkened. "Mr. Potter, you are well aware of the circumstances that happened. It was your brother. Ten points from Ravenclaw."

"Yeah, well, Dan would say it was him wouldn't he? And you'd all believe him too because he farts sunshine and daisies."

"Another ten points from Ravenclaw."

Harry subsided and crossed his arms.

"Moving on, what is the difference between a cockatrice and a basilisk? Miss Granger."

Hermione squeaked. Hobday waited patiently for her to answer as she ran over all her notes in her head. Finally she said, "The basilisk is hatched by a toad on top of a hen's egg."

"When we, wizards, try to breed them yes. How are they hatched in nature?"

"Uh..." Hermione stammered, her eyes starting to shine. "I don't know, sir," she admitted in defeat.

"Well," Hobday said sympathetically. "Two points for Ravenclaw. Anyone else care to have a stab at it?"

Harry raised his hand in the air as several of his house mates hissed at him to put it back down. Hobday sighed and called on him.

"The basilisk is hatched by a cockerel from the egg of a serpent while the cockatrice is hatched from a hen's egg incubated in a female serpent's nest."

"You are correct, Mr. Potter. Five points to Ravenclaw. Last three questions. Who here can tell me two non-magical ways to kill a basilisk?"

Harry raised his hand as did Hermione and Daphne Greengrass. Hobday called on Greengrass.

"The first one you have drawn up on the board, sir. The cries of a rooster is fatal to a basilisk. The other is by holding a mirror up to its gaze."

"Or stabbing it with a sword," Harry muttered under his breath.

"Quite right, Miss Greengrass. Five points to Slytherin. What creature is immune to its gaze?"

Harry raised his hand as did Rebecca Bradley and Theodore Nott. Hobday called on Bradley.

"The weasel, professor."

"Indeed. Five points for Ravenclaw. Last question, Mr. Nott, tell me, what species of basilisk is extinct?"

Nott looked startled. "There was more than one?"

Hobday raised an eyebrow. "Yes, Mr. Nott. For not doing your research properly, five points from Slytherin. Would anyone like to take a guess?"

Harry raised his hand and Professor Hobday looked around the class for other hands. Harry cleared his throat drawing the professor's attention. Reluctantly, Hobday called on Harry to answer.

"There were two recorded types of basilisks, professor. The first burned everything it approached and the second could kill with its gaze. The first is extinct, while the second one is endangered."

"Correct, Mr. Potter. Five points to Ravenclaw."

The bell rang and class ended with a groan from several students as they turned in their improperly researched essays and received a fresh topic. Apparently Hobday decided to give them all different things to research this time. Harry laughed when Draco got Transylvania, Vampires and Muggle Lore. He could just see the

disgusted look on Draco's face when he, a pureblood, had to write four feet on Muggle traditions surrounding Count Dracula. He wondered vaguely if Draco would come to the conclusion that the Count was entirely fictional or not and laughed internally.

Harry quickly made his way to Arithmacy. On the way he saw Luna in the halls wearing outlandish updates to the school's uniform. She was sparkly blue with multicolored buttons sewn all over her robes. She waved at him before slipping into a not-so-secret side corridor that went to Transfigurations. He continued avoiding clusters of girls giggling over the new Witch Weekly sporting several pinups of the guys from all four Hogwarts Quidditch teams.

"Hello Harry," Hermione said sidling up behind him. She held her books close to her chest as she fell into step beside him.

"Hermione," he acknowledged with a sidelong glance her way. "How are you doing?"

"Better," she answered before laughing derisively, "but that's not hard to do."

"I'm sorry," he said, putting his hands into his pockets and looking out the castle windows.

"What for?" Hermione asked curiously, "For saving me? For taking a breather? For breaking my heart as much as I was forced to break yours?"

"Well; aren't you?" he demanded, shaking his head angrily. "I've been through hell too, you know."

"I know," she whispered softly. "Just don't forget you're not the only one hurting here. I love you and you love me and this is not something we should be going through alone, not when we have each other."

"I haven't been yours for two months, Hermione," Harry threw over his shoulder.

Hermione pursed her lips together. "Do be sensible, Harry. Being stubborn only hurts us both needlessly."

"There's nothing sensible about this," he argued, turning left abruptly and opening the door to the classroom beckoning her inside.

She breezed past him, her bushy hair brushing lightly against his arm as she did. He pulled back a little and followed her into the room where a few fellow Ravenclaws were already picking Professor Vector's brains for equations on previous N.E.W.T exams.

"Settle down," she called out briskly, ending the impromptu vulture session. Harry slid into the open seat by Hermione at the front. "We have much to go over before the examinations. Last term was mostly about the complexities of time and jumping it with Time Turners. As I've said before you all grasped the concept faster than any of my other N.E.W.T. classes. As such I will be expecting more from you than the others as we go into our last topic of the term before review.

"Open your notebooks and start your notes," Vector said waving her wand casually at the board which flipped and writing started to appear.

A few students groaned and pulled out Omnioculars and used them to zoom in on the writing. Harry cast a copy charm on his quill and directed it at the board and it went off like a muggle rocket zipping across his notebook in a very spirited way. Hermione copied him and soon her own quill was whipping alongside his jotting down the notes word for word.

The lesson picked up about a half hour later as Vector eased them into the mechanics of spell creation. She took a simple feather-light charm and broke it down for them. Harry had to renew the charm on his quill so it could keep up; Hermione started doing her notes by hand. Vector took them through a disarming jinx and a tripping hex before asking them to pull apart for homework a charm, a jinx, a hex and for extra credit, a curse.

Hermione raised her hand and asked if similar spells to the ones demonstrated in class were okay to do or should they try for more difficult spells. Vector merely smiled a twinkle in her eye and shooed

them all out of the classroom. Hermione bristled in annoyance at her question being avoided. Harry didn't say anything to her and followed the Ravenclaws heading toward Charms.

When they got to the classroom, Hermione suddenly shifted closer to him. Harry glanced down at her before quickly raising his eyes and seeing Daniel. He felt a boiling anger rise inside him alongside the burning desire to protect Hermione. Harry stayed close to her, but didn't look at her again. His eyes were on Daniel's, who was giving him a dirty look.

"He got off clean," she whispered softly, averting her eyes and stepping up into the purely Ravenclaw stands. The animosity between the two houses was still violent.

"He what?" Harry growled, looking at her. "I had evidence!"

"Shh," she hushed, tucking her hair behind her ear. "He'll hear you."

"Typical," he grumbled, slinging himself into his seat beside her and placing his books on the desk in front of him, forgetting all together that he had wanted any space. "Just bloody typical."

Hermione lowered her voice even further and said, "He told the Headmaster it was clearly a setup and that the locket had been given to him by the Weasley twins. Well they were called in from Diagon Alley and they said quite abashedly that their sister had seen you steal it from Daniel and Ron's room so that the present he was obviously going to give to her you were going to give to me. By then your parents were involved and everything was getting murderous..."

"Why wasn't I called in then?" he asked, keeping an eye on his brother.

"Because James and Lily didn't want you there."

"Perfect," he growled. "What else happened? Did your parents give my mum and dad the old one two?"

She shook her head, "They weren't allowed to come."

Harry gave her a startled look. "Why the bloody hell not? You were nearly..." he lowered his voice drastically and whispered, "raped."

Hermione paled and ducked down under the desk to grab her things. She took her time laying them out before her. "Yes, well, Daniel refuted hotly that he'd only ever seen the locket after the Weasley twins had given it to him to send to the pretty girl he fancies. He thought it was their way to help him ask me out and Fred and George got really angry and asked him why he'd ask me out when he had Ginny."

"What'd he say then?" Harry asked as Professor Flitwick called for their attention.

"That Ginny was his number one fan girl, not his girlfriend and clearly her notions of them were what had all the rumormongers yapping about all the time. Daniel denied any attraction to her and said her delusions weren't going to stop him from getting what his mum and dad had--a healthy loving relationship. Then he looked right at me and I got ill," she finished hurriedly, opening her book and delving into it to escape anything Harry might have said.

Harry glared at Daniel who flashed a dark grin his way before leaning over to whisper something to Ron. Ron looked at them and smiled thinly. After that Harry had a hard time concentrating on Flitwick's lecture and chose instead to think up ways of eviscerating Daniel.

The last half-hour they started working on the practical aspects of conjuring which Harry did mindlessly conjuring a mirror, a trunk, and a chair in quick succession. Daniel kept shouting the incantations, his voice laced with frustration and fear. The fear well hidden to anybody who wasn't trying to intimidate the pompous prat, which Harry was doing admirably. His silent countenance doing more to scare the git than open glaring at this point.

Flitwick came around and watched Hermione conjure a small button. He gave her a few pointers and told her to try something bigger. He glanced at Harry for a moment, but Harry didn't wave his wand or try to conjure anything for the tiny professor. As Flitwick went around the classroom helping out Gryffindors and Ravenclaws alike, Harry watched Daniel sweat.

The bell tolled through the corridor, heralding the end of the day for most students. Hermione not being most students gathered her things and after shooting Harry a quick glance ran out of the room as fast as she could. Harry however stayed rooted to the spot, watching his brother and his group of cohorts gather their belongings and laughing uproariously. Only he noticed the strain gathering in Daniel's eyes. He calmly held his wand at his side, waiting for his Head of House to finish talking to Rebecca Bradley and Mandy Brocklehurst.

When the two girls and the professor left was when Harry made his move. He silently hexed his brother who started stammering and sweating profusely.

"What's wrong Daniel?" Ron asked shooping the others away. Seamus and Dean led Lavender and Parvati out of the classroom, all the while shooting the duo questioning glances.

"I'll tell you what's wrong," Harry intoned softly, walking toward them.

Ron glowered at Harry. "Potter," he blustered.

"Weasley," Harry returned mockingly. "Are you my brother's girlfriend or something? Stop hovering and go away."

"What do you want?" Daniel asked, wincing when he tried to scowl.

"Payback," Harry said darkly. "Since Dumbledore's got his head up your arse I'm calling you out for what you did to Hermione."

"Calling me out?" Daniel laughed scornfully, wincing again.

"Yes," he said simply. "You've been a tough bastard to pin down. What were you doing--hiding in your common room sniveling like a little girl?"

"Quidditch," Ron sneered. "We were doing Quidditch, minus the time your little trollop tried to pin Dan down for sexual harassment."

"I'll deal with you later," Harry said firmly to Ron, locking eyes with Daniel. "As for now, however," he said lightly, "it's been a long time coming. I hereby challenge you Daniel Lawrence Potter to a

wizarding duel for your transgressions against me and against Hermione. Do you accept by your word and magic or shall you plead guilty now and be done with it?"

Sweat trickled down Daniel's brow. "I decide the location and time," he declared.

"Fine," Harry said tersely.

"Battlements, midnight," Daniel replied swiftly, pulling out his wand. "By my magic and word I accept Harry James Potter's challenge."

A yellow spark cracked from their wands, satisfying Harry who lowered his. "Trying to keep this secret," he stated contemptuously. "How like you."

Ron folded his arms across his chest. "You don't know what you got yourself into, but I'm going to look forward to Dan beating your arse."

"Oh I know exactly what I got into," Harry replied smirking. "The question remains, did Daniel?"

"We'll see about that," Ron declared hotly pulling out his wand. "Not that he needs it, but I, Ronald Billius Weasley, do declare myself by word and magic Daniel Lawrence Potter's second."

A second yellow light cracked between Harry's lowered wand and Ron's. Harry grinned maliciously.

"I won't need a second."

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 33°«««°»»»°

Chapter 34

Harry stood calmly in the midst of the howling gales. His hair whipped across his face, revealing the lightning bolt shaped scar that was the bane of his existence. He ignored the cold and looked to the stars twinkling above; stretching out like a blanket of light alongside the half-moon.

He had been waiting for two hours in the shadows on top of the castle's battlements. He did not trust Daniel to act at all honorably. Arriving early allowed him the time to look for traps and ensure that nobody arrived with Daniel to interfere.

He had found and disabled two ward configurations. One was designed to throw him over the parapets should he get within range. A simple finite broke that one which made Harry think Ron had set it up. The other was clever and took two sets of thirteen minutes to break down. Daniel had set up a reversal ward, which would have thrown anything Harry cast back at him and stopped any counters from aiding him against Daniel's attacks.

The ward itself was probably one of the cleverest bits of magic Daniel had ever done. He was just unlucky to have used a ward Harry was familiar with in both book and practical knowledge. Harry had taken one look at it and had remembered it from *Ward, Not Just a Pretty Female Charge*.

The door to the lower levels banged open. A solitary cloaked figure emerged and ran toward him. Harry lifted his wand and the figure stumbled to a halt and flipped back the hood. Harry's breath caught as he met wide brown eyes glittering with determination.

"Hermione," he breathed, the wind snatching up her name and tossing them over the sides of the ramparts. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to be your second of course!" she yelled above the noise.

"No," Harry stated firmly.

"No?" she said questioningly, the wind gusted blowing a strand of hair across her lips. "Too bad. I'm staying."

"How'd you hear?" he asked angrily, forcing himself to look away from her, blocking the tempting image of her before him.

"The gossip grapevine; where else?" she answered, tucking her wild hair up and off her neck. A few stubborn strands broke free almost instantly but she ignored them.

Harry touched the top of the parapet lightly with his fingers and looked out onto the grounds. Indistinct blobs were darting around. He squinted trying to make them out as he said, "Thought he would have kept it secret."

"No," she said joining him. "He's been boasting in the Gryffs common room. Well Ron more like, but Daniel didn't stop him."

"Where are they?" Harry asked looking round toward where she'd come from as if expecting them to emerge from the shadows.

"The Headmaster is trying to talk them out of it as we speak," she answered with a shrug of her shoulders.

"They took magical oaths," Harry said grimly, a shrewd and calculating look glinting warningly. "To not duel is to be squib."

"That's what I thought," Hermione replied giving him an admiring look. "You wouldn't have left them with a chance to back down from it. Not now."

"What has been happening then?" he asked vaguely, but Hermione understood. She always did.

"The whole of the school is in an uproar. Many are calling for your head. Everyone with a broom is mounting them as we speak and rushing up into the air to watch. Others are running to towers and looking from there."

"So his private humiliation is going to be a rather well publicized humiliation. Ha."

"Harry..." Hermione said determinably, her expression matching his fierce gleam of triumph.

"Yes?" he asked looking down at her upturned face.

"Give him no quarter," she commanded. "Show everyone just how pathetic Daniel Potter is."

The doors banged open again and a pale blond figure came whipping through. Harry recognized Luna immediately. The daft girl was running around without a cloak. He snapped his fingers conjuring one without thought and when Luna barreled into him at top speed, he slung it around her shoulders.

"Daft girl," he muttered affectionately. "I suppose you've heard too."

"I'm here to be your second," Luna said breathlessly, her wide blue eyes darting up to him before turning onto Hermione. "Or third."

Hermione's flushed complexion looked gray and pale as she stared at the cloak draped so casually around the younger girl's shoulders. In her jealousy, it never occurred to her that it had been delivered without the use of a wand. She glanced up at Harry, who was staring wryly down upon the silvery creature before him.

"I'm not in need of either," he told her, plucking the wand from behind Luna's ear and handing it to her. "But if you insist, then who am I to stop you? It's not like I'm a raving mad gerrumph."

"Garrumph," she corrected, gripping the wand tightly and with her other hand readjusting the fit of the cloak. "A gerrumph would just eat you and be done with it."

"Of course," he murmured, "How silly of me. Garrumph's are the ones that like to play with their food."

"There's no such thing--" Hermione began hotly.

Harry turned cold eyes onto her. "As a gerrumph?"

"Or garrumph!"

"You need to get out more," Luna said lightly, her lopsided bird feather earrings whipping through her pale locks. "Not everything is found in books."

"Not everything can be a perfect fantasy world either," Hermione tossed back, hugging herself. "Not everything is fun and games. Some things are awful and hurt worse than anything you can imagine."

Luna gave her a steady look before nodding. "Yes, some things are far worse than anything imaginable. Others," she added looking at Harry, "are even better than your wildest fantasies."

Before Hermione could retort, Harry silenced them both by stepping in front of them and looking out into the shadows. Luna touched the small of Harry's back before slipping backwards. Harry glanced backwards at her briefly before focusing on the shadows again.

Something had moved.

A black dog emerged panting loudly and Harry scowled. "Uncle Sirius," he acknowledged. "If you're here Uncle Remus and my father aren't far behind. Funny, I thought I was dueling Daniel, but it appears he's sent others in his place."

The dog shifted and blurred rising up into the tall slender figure of his godfather. Long black locks of hair whipped free of its moorings. The handsome nearly forty year old man snarled as his wand sprang into his hand.

"Young man, you're in serious trouble!" Sirius yelled hotly across the battlements.

Harry lifted a sardonic brow, its impact lost in the darkness. "Where is my brother? He has to answer for his crimes some day."

"The little muggleborn trollop is just yanking both of your chains."

"Hermione would never do that," Harry declared, holding his hand out to stop her from doing anything.

Sirius raised his free hand in the air. Harry noted the signal for what it was and kept his eyes locked on the man in front of him.

"She wrote Daniel love letters, did you know that? He has a whole box filled that he dug up out of his trunk to show us. A compulsion charm is a pretty lie but it doesn't do that much damage."

"Ah," Harry said knowingly. "I take then Dumbledore didn't tell you how dangerous the locket was to begin with or what it really was. No matter, right? All in the days' work to keep Daniel's reputation unsullied."

"Padfoot," Uncle Lupin said soberly sweeping into view from on top of his ancient broomstick. He alighted and tucked the rapidly shrinking broom into his robes. "Have you convinced him to back down?"

"I was getting to that," the other man said gruffly.

Harry laughed riotously. "I'm not backing down. If Daniel doesn't have the balls for this little fight then he can back down."

"Now Harry," Remus said cajolingly, "please see reason. Daniel has been severely taxed and with..." he stopped and glanced at the two girls behind him. "Well with the you-know-what hanging over him, and of the two of you, it would be better if you declared forfeit."

"And lose my magic?" Harry shouted incredulously. "Not fucking bloody likely!"

"It's for the greater good," the werewolf said reasonably.

"Did Dumbledore stick a hand up your arse? Are you his puppet now?" Harry demanded, relaxing his grip on his wand so his hand wouldn't cramp.

"Harry," Remus said closing his eyes in a wave of tiredness. "Don't push this. There will be consequences if you do."

"I'll take my chances," he replied with a sneer. "What's the worse you can Dumbledore do to me?"

"Not just Dumbledore," Sirius said. "Your parents too."

Harry looked between the two of them and shook his head. "The answer is emphatically no, not happening."

The door banged open, crashing into the solid rock wall as several people filed out onto the cramped settings. Harry watched them come through and shook his head at the lot of them. They were quite the bunch.

Ron and Daniel were huddled together whispering fiercely and he knew they were talking about their well laid traps. Dumbledore wore a worried frown matching perfectly McGonagall's angry glare. Flitwick was there too, the expression on his face unreadable to Harry in the dimness of the rooftop. He looked last at his parents and gave them the barest smirk of acknowledgement.

"Harry James Potter," Lily berated crossly as she stalked towards him. Harry cast a charm to keep her back and she hit the barrier with a bit of a shock. "Just what the hell do you think you're doing?" she demanded, placing her hands on her hips.

"Protecting my right to duel the little shithead you call son and I unfortunately call brother."

"Should have taken the strap to you sooner," James growled, stepping forward. "But Lily kept telling me you were just acting out for the attention."

"The glory hound in this family isn't me so you just point your wand elsewhere," Harry said dispassionately, nodding slightly towards his brother.

"Let us calm down, shall we," Dumbledore said benevolently interposing between Harry and his parents. "Before we do something rash or say something we can't take back."

Lily nodded gratefully and clung to James' arm. Harry let his wand drop because he couldn't hold it out forever.

"Now, as I see it, Harry," said Dumbledore, stroking his beard. "You have two options. The first is to continue with this duel; an illegally challenged duel, mind you. A duel can not be issued on school grounds by students, no matter their adult status. You are a ward of the school and you can not put another of Hogwarts' wards in danger of losing their magic. This is a place of learning not fighting.

"Your second choice is to freely forfeit and we can perhaps come to an agreement. Squibs are able to fly brooms, we could give you young Mr. Blake's spot on the team. That way you can be seen by scouts and have an opportunity to turn professional. Or if that doesn't work, I'm sure Professor Snape wouldn't mind having you as an apprentice. A Potions Mastery would take you far."

Harry looked at the expectant look on Professor Dumbledore's face and the agreeable expressions on his parents' upturned visages and sneered.

"Daniel fights me or turns squib. If he's squib, I become the first heir of the Potter fortune and you can't disown me. A pureblood line must always have an heir, even if a Malfoy wouldn't have us because we've muddy up our bloodline with muggleborns and halfbloods."

"I don't have one," Sirius commented wryly from the sidelines.

Harry smirked. "That's because your mother is dead. Alive you would already be tied to Deyanira Yaxley or Lalia Gamp."

"Mother always liked pureblood inbreeding."

"Nevertheless, the Black name will die with you if you don't come to your senses," Harry replied. "You not having children isn't such a great loss, but the Black name still stands for something--"

"Yeah evil--"

"And it shouldn't die out because you're too pigheaded. With the exception of your name, I would say you weren't even marriageable."

"You seem to have a lot of fondness for blood," Dumbledore inserted looking disconcerted.

Harry shook his head at them. "I have pride in the background and in tradition but blood can go hang itself."

"But do you live by that declaration, Harry, or are you pandering to us because you think that's what we want to hear. Do you in fact have another master--"

"You can go hang yourself too," Harry interrupted coldly.

Luna grabbed his free hand and tugged him backwards. Harry followed her pull and stood there proudly, chin tilted upright in defiance. Hermione stood with them uncertain but angry enough to stay. Dumbledore waved his hands at James and Lily and James took the lead.

"Harry, stop this foolishness now or I will disown you," he said, like the idea just came to him.

Lily gasped and looked up at James. "We didn't talk about that!"

"So?" he answered heatedly. "If nobility is all Harry puts pride in what better way than to call him to heel?"

Sirius nodded vigorously while Remus whispered something into James' ear and stepped back demurely. James considered his words and whispered something to Lily which calmed her down. She glanced at Harry and waited.

Daniel and Ron in all this were silent, expectant. Harry threw Daniel a glare and mouthed 'snitch.' His brother's face reddened as did Ron's.

"My stance on this hasn't changed," Harry said loudly over the blustering wind. "The night grows long and Daniel needs to get some hospital rest so we better get a move on."

McGonagall leaned over and said something to Dumbledore and he sighed, his shoulders slumping.

"Harry," he said gravely, "--as the instigator of this duel, I, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore as Headmaster of Hogwarts, do

hereby declare Harry James Potter schooling as forfeit. From here on out you are expelled."

Hermione gasped in horror, turning her head aside as furious tears welled up unbidden.

"Perfect," Harry replied, readying his wand again. "Now Dan, let's duel."

Flitwick pushed his way through everyone, the top of his head barely scrapping the top of everyone's waists. He threw a disgusted look towards Dumbledore and McGonagall and aimed his wand at his throat.

"ENOUGH!" he bellowed, startling everyone into silence. "I don't understand all the politics going on here tonight. I'm afraid I never will, but this is beyond foolish! Albus, you can't be serious? You've never expelled a single student in all of your tenure here and you said you never would. That was something I signed on board for, but if this is the way it's going to be we're going to have a long discussion in private later without Professor McGonagall."

"Filius--"

Flitwick waved him off and abrupt faced toward Harry. "Now Mr. Potter, it's quite clear that you are making more enemies right now than friends. I offer my services as your dueling referee... aha... as it were. I promise to be fair and to follow the standard code of rules and ethics."

Harry studied him briefly before nodding his agreement.

"Who are the seconds?" Flitwick asked running roughshod over Dumbledore's complaints as if he weren't even speaking.

"I'm Harry's," both Luna and Hermione said at once and then looked at each other. Hermione looked put out but Luna merely smiled radiantly.

"Well which is it?" Flitwick demanded.

"She is," Luna said chirpily. "I'm his third."

Harry rolled his eyes lightly, keeping his attention more firmly fixated on the adults going batty at the turn of events. James and Sirius looked ready to curse something or someone.

Flitwick blinked. "Thirds. Unusual but accepted."

"I thought you said you didn't need a second!" Daniel yelled pushing his way to the front with Ron stepping up behind him. "You who was all high and mighty earlier about it."

"I changed my mind," Harry said easily, watching McGonagall hover around Dumbledore like a pesky nargle around the mistletoe.

"Figured you would," Ron sneered. "Can't trust you nerdbirds."

"Ten points from Gryffindor," Flitwick said looking outraged at Ron's outburst. "And a detention with Filch is in order I think. Badmouthing other houses, the impudence of it all and in front of a Head of House no less."

"What!" Ron shouted, Remus came up and spoke quietly with Flitwick calming the smaller professor who rescinded on the detention but not on the loss of points.

"Who's your second Mr. Potter?" he asked Daniel.

"Ron is."

"Do you have a third?"

Daniel shook his head looking all the world the spoiled brat. "No, Harry here didn't tell me we could have thirds. It's not fair. I think he's trying to pull a fast one over me."

Flitwick bounced on the balls of his feet. He turned to the adults and offered up the choice of third to those there with the exception of Dumbledore and McGonagall who were professors themselves. James had to fight Sirius for the right of third and managed to win,

making Sirius pout. Harry watched on in silent bemusement as his father walked to the spot of third and waited.

"Right," Flitwick said glowering at them all. "As stated by the rules and regulations I am ordering for this space to be cleared of all but the fighters. There will be no distractions or obstacles in the fighting arena. Mount your brooms and get off the battlements."

Dumbledore clearly didn't like this and summoned Fawkes to lift him up off the rooftop and fly him to a better place to watch. McGonagall and Lily ran down the way they came to grab brooms and Remus and Sirius hopped on the broom Remus rode in on.

The others lined up on opposite sides of the battlement and stared down the length of it to their opponents. Harry and Daniel took their position in the middle by Flitwick who hurriedly erected a barrier to catch stray spell fire and several anti-cheating wards on the areas where the others stood. There would be no assistance from those quarters until called for.

"Now, gentlemen," Flitwick started when he was satisfied with the work. "As the official referee I will remind you of the rules of engagement. There shall be no Unforgivables used at any time during this duel. The use of one will automatically disqualify you and the rest of your helpmates.

"You are not to go outside the barriers that I've erected. Both feet must remain firmly planted on the ground with the exception of course being dodging. No use of brooms, carpets, or other transportation device is allowed. For the sake of following regulation I will remind you that Apparition is illegal, though seeing as the wards here at Hogwarts prevent you from doing so it is a moot point.

"Your position as active dueler is rescinded when you are unconscious or disabled. Should you lose your wand to the other, breaking is of course illegal. Muggle fighting can be used sparingly in an attempt to regain a lost wand. You will have two minutes to find a way to get it back or your second will be called in.

"Dark Arts are extremely frowned upon but are not illegal unless they cause death immediately to the opponent. As I presume, Madam

Pomfrey is being grabbed at this very moment. All curses and other nasty surprises should be well within her ability to care for, assuming that--nothing is too obscure to use in your arsenal.

"Lastly, as this is a fight, I expect things to get dirty. A clever trick or spell might win you the duel, but and I say this with aha... circumspection show me what you can do. Now wait here while I go speak with each of your teams and relay the rules to them."

Flitwick rushed off going to Daniel's side first and speaking with Ron and James.

"I knew Dad would be on my side," Daniel said smugly. "I've no doubt you've botched things up right nicely with him and Mum."

"Like I care," Harry retorted. "I'm here to whip you and there's nothing you can do about it."

"Oh yeah?" Daniel baited, puffing up his chest. "I'm the Boy Wonder, I'll come out of this smelling better than roses."

"Not if I beat your arse."

"Won't they just say I let you win?" Daniel threw back smirking.

Harry glared. "Even so, watch your back after this because I'm not rescuing you from Voldemort anymore."

"I can get away from the overgrown bat," Daniel said with surety.

"I was there in the cemetery you moron," Harry growled. "How on earth did you think that portkey flew to you?"

"Magic," Daniel said looking a little nervous now. Harry smirked. "I performed a silent--"

"Wandless spell? I don't think so," Harry returned, fiddling idly with his wand. "Let's just hope the Dark Lord doesn't come after you, for your sake."

"Mum and Dad got away from him three times," Daniel stated, tilting his chin up, "All they had was seven years of tuition. It's not like I would need special training--"

"Though you seem to have it in spades and still you're mediocre. The next time you think about going near Hermione remember this," Harry said darkly. "I will kill you."

"She came to me," Daniel said balling his hands into fists.

"Under compulsion charms from you and Voldemort. You might have wiggled your way out of trouble again, because Dumbledore thinks the sun shines out of your arse, but I know differently. Stay away from her. If I even hear a whisper that you or your goons approached her, I will come to you..."

"And kill me," Daniel replied with scorn. "Yeah right. Like you've got it in you."

"Gentlemen," Flitwick said returning to them. "Go to your positions. At my signal the duel will commence. Good luck to you both."

At nearly two in the morning Harry and Daniel crossed the battlements toward opposite ends. Harry reached his first and received a small wave from Luna for encouragement and a worried smile from Hermione. He gave them both a brief reassuring grin and pivoted on his heel. Daniel did the same a second later and sinking into a dueling stance. Harry stayed standing upright, face forward, expectant and still.

Flitwick conjured a chair and levitated himself above the two of them. Several dark blurs hovered at the edges of the tiny professor's shields. Students and teachers on brooms most likely. Harry flicked his gaze back to Daniel wishing for more light to see the expression on his face. Flitwick raised his wand and Harry forced himself to stay loose.

Sparks flew from the tip of Flitwick's wand and Harry launched himself into action. The first spell he threw hurtled down the length between them and splashed against a standard shield. He threw another and dodged incoming flashes of light. He couldn't hear Daniel

over the howling wind to know how to block them and after throwing several silencing spells at different heights sunk into a crouch and waited.

A garbled spell halted mid incantation and Harry knew he scored a hit. He rushed forward while his brother attempted to cast a silent finite on himself. He reached the midway point near Flitwick and paused to hurl a quick chopping and hacking curse.

§*Light!*§ Harry yelled, switching into parseltongue, using the unknown language as a weapon.

Light erupted immediately on the rooftop, revealing the scene in total clarity. Daniel had been nicked by his curse and was bleeding a little, still struggling to perform the silent spell that would release himself. Harry tossed a few interesting hexes toward him, intent on stringing out his brother's humiliation.

Suddenly Daniel fell, a curse sailing over his head, and it took Harry a moment to discern what was happening. Daniel wasn't falling, he was shrinking! Suddenly his brother was gone and Harry was staring at the space Daniel had just stood slightly bewildered. He glanced around the battlements and couldn't spy him.

It wasn't a disillusionment charm because of the shrinking and it couldn't be a bizarre form of wizard travel because Flitwick would've blown a loud noise from his wand. Harry edged to the side of the roof, bracing himself against the parapets.

He cast a revealing charm on his eyes and looked around for any indication of his brother. A slight speck of red scuttled on the ground and Harry focused on it. It was a spider! His brother was an animagus too!

§*Change back!*§ he said, throwing the magic at his brother's animagus form.

The spider dodged it with a quick hop onto the wall to get up off the floor. The spell dissipated against the stones and Harry cast it again aiming this time where he thought his brother would go instead of at the tiny creature. He missed again but the sport was on. Harry tossed

the same spell repeatedly at the moving speck all the while moving closer and closer to it.

"Come on Dan," he taunted, following the scuttling arachnid. "Are you going to cower like that all night?"

When spider Daniel darted into a small crack in the wall Harry shook his head and whispered, *§Make a glass jar.§*

A glass jar popped into existence and fell into his hand. Harry unscrewed the cap and pointed his wand at the fissure. "*Accio* spider!"

He caught the flailing critter as it hurtled out. In desperation Daniel started undoing the spell but Harry capped the lid on him before he could grow much bigger than a flesh mottled bug and sealed the jar with an unbreakable charm.

"I do believe," Harry murmured, walking back and presenting the jar to Flitwick. "That this is sufficiently incapacitated.

"Yes," Flitwick agreed with a wink. "Quite."

Harry walked back to his starting point and watched Ron bounce around on the balls of his feet. Ron would be a piece of cake. The lanky boy hadn't nearly the training that Daniel did and look where it got him. A simple *silencio* was all it took to render all that training a moot point. Perhaps, Dumbledore will push Daniel to get the basis of silent spell casting down.

"You're doing good!" Luna cheered looking excited. "I told you, didn't I?"

He glanced over his shoulder at her and smiled. His gaze drifted to Hermione who's smile had grown a little stronger.

"You sure showed him, even with his animagus form, you still beat him."

"Yeah," he said, feeling satisfaction run through him. "The sodding bastard won't be able to hold his head up at school tomorrow. Now it's time to take care of the others."

Harry faced forward again just as Ron stepped into his dueling position. Harry stifled a laugh at the attempt for cockiness. Ron looked worse than he did right before a particularly gruesome Slytherin-Gryffindor Quidditch match.

Flitwick shot sparks into the air once more and Harry launched a stunner at the redhead. Ron ducked and rolled, putting his Quidditch training to use and fired a disarming hex at the top of his voice. Harry casually placed a standard barrier between him and the spell and fired off a clumsy charm followed immediately by conjuring a snake.

§Strangle the redhead, but don't kill him.§

The snake hissed dumbly and slithered off to fulfill its orders.

Harry ducked a wildly shot jinx that was surprisingly accurate as Ron tripped over his own feet and fell onto the stone floor. Ron gave a garbled yell and hoisted himself back into a standing position. His face was as red as his hair.

The snake was almost there and all Harry had to do was keep Ron occupied. Harry slowed down his attacks, luring the other boy into thinking he had the upper hand, that he was tiring. Grinning, Ron threw a flurry of schoolyard jinxes in an attempt to get back on the offensive. A private itching hex hit Harry and he gritted his teeth, pausing long enough to cancel the hex before firing back.

Ron smirked then and cast the activation charms on the traps he and Daniel had set up earlier. Harry watched in wicked amusement as the smug grin slid right off of Ron's face. He took advantage of the redhead's break in stride and aimed a mild knock-out hex at Ron and let it go. It flew from his wand and hit the redhead squarely on his chest. The flicker of a half-incanted shield charm died as the snake came up beside the Gryffindor.

The snake hissed a faint war cry and latched itself around Ron's neck, wrapping tightly around the thick column and squeezing. Ron started

to choke but being unconscious already from Harry's spell did not fight back. Harry looked at Flitwick waiting for the professor to call the match and cancel the enchantments.

The tiny professor waited a couple of minutes, making sure that Ron wasn't going to emerge from the mild hex before waving his wand in a flurry of wand movements. The snake disappeared and Ron woke up. He was raised gently off the battlements and a broom swooped by revealing a stern looking Madam Pomfrey. She hustled Ron away from the roof and toward the ground to give him some medical attention.

Harry rejoined his friends and stood waiting while his father took up position, his face grim and determined. The last opponent was the toughest one in Harry's opinion. James could duel with the best of them and Harry wouldn't put anything past him.

Father or not, James Potter held a grudge and Harry was under no illusions. He would not be expecting James to exhibit paternal tolerance and prepared himself mentally to not hold back, knowing that James' wouldn't.

Perhaps, Harry thought grimly, being a Potter was the least of his worries as he noted James' gleeful and darkening expression.

Flitwick looked between both duelers and shook his head. Harry focused solely on James, watching the tightening of fingers, the slight shift of grip, the tension in his stance. Harry would know when Flitwick shot off sparks by the sudden uncoiling of James' body.

Harry erected a shield with fractions of a second to spare. The solid gong of an invisible spell sounded as it ricocheted off the metal barrier Harry held up. Harry kept the shield and used his wand to toss back an equally stout curse.

Borderline Dark Arts, it seemed, were not below James. Harry responded in kind, ducking and dodging ones he couldn't hear as James launched a silent attack, twisting and weaving the spells until Harry transfigured himself into a frog and hopped over the wall where he pressed himself flat.

James looked nonplussed at what appeared to be another son moving into his animagus form before he copied what Harry had done and called out a summoning charm. Harry dropped his amphibious state and blocked the summoner before it hit him.

Quickly Harry cast the *sonorus* spell at James' before the older wizard regrouped. James' magnified voice was so loud that even whispered curses could be heard as shouts. Harry easily swatted away a half dozen incantations and stopped quite a few in their track before James' sensibility took over and he canceled the charm.

A splitter curse sailed over Harry's hair by a millimeter and slammed into the barrier Flitwick set up where it transformed into sound energy with a thunderous cracking noise. Harry cast a wandless tongue-tying hex that would quite literally tie James' tongue in a knot followed by a silent sound blast intent on knocking James off his feet.

The first spell was dodged easily enough, though Harry could see James' tiring. The second spell exploded in a wave of sound doing as it intended and knocking James off his feet. Harry ran down the length of the battlements once more and reached his father just as James tried to stand up. Harry kicked him in the face, blood spurted everywhere.

He reared back to do it again when his foot was caught and he was tugged off balance. His wand clattered on the stone roof. Harry scrambled for it as James struggled upright. James' kicked the wand away from Harry's grasping fingers and towered over him.

He pressed his wand to Harry's nose and smiled darkly. "Don't move," James whispered fiercely.

Harry didn't.

"While I got you here," James said, "Know this: I no-longer consider you my son."

"Ha! That's a laugh. When have you ever--" Harry halted at the jab in the face. He reared away from the wand and glared.

"As soon as Lily and I are home I will take great pleasure in burning your name off of our family tapestry. You are never to claim Potter as your surname again," James said victoriously, pressing his wand back against Harry's nose.

"Too bad I don't give a shit," Harry growled against the press of the mahogany wand. "You screwed yourself. Daniel isn't the Boy Wonder. He never was."

"Liar."

"Don't believe me," Harry said unaffectedly. "You haven't yet; don't start now. Just remember this down the road when I prove Daniel to be the fraud he is."

"The only fraud here is you," James said.

Harry glowered up at his blood-kin matching the older wizard's gaze. Thick, hot emotion roared in Harry. Even sitting there, lost without a wand, he felt powerful. He was not defeated, not by any means.

"You're worthless and you'll always be worthless," James added cruelly.

Harry hated him then. Swift and blistering, rage smoldered inside until, he quite thought he would combust with it. James looking like he was burning too. Harry watched in shock as James turned to black so fast it over before Harry could blink.

James Potter had turned to stone.

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 34°«««°»»»°

Chapter 35

Unnerved, Harry scrambled back on his hands and feet to get away from the stone figure. Anger left him in a rush of cold hard fact. He had just petrified somebody while in his human form.

Harry reached out for his wand and beckoned it with a hiss, taking comfort in the warmth of the holly in his hand. Equilibrium restored, he stood up and warily approached the solid figure.

Flitwick dropped down beside him and touched James on the shoulder. "He's a rock," Filius said, surprised. "I thought... I don't know what I thought." He looked at Harry.

Uncomfortable, Harry gripped his wand a little tighter just as Hermione and Luna came running up to them. Hermione crashed into Harry, both tilting precariously until he steadied her. She was babbling; her words were so jumbled up he couldn't make anything out.

Luna gave him a dreamy-eyed gaze, and congratulated him on his victory while absently pulling her wand from behind her ear. Harry glanced at Flitwick who nodded confirming her statement and Harry managed a grin. He had won.

The magical barriers dispelled in a flicker of golden light and suddenly noise erupted from all around them. Harry and Hermione jumped, startled at the noise, while Luna smiled benignly, her wide blue eyes focused somewhere past their shoulders. From the sound of it the whole school was in an uproar.

Dumbledore appeared with a flash of fire and sound, courtesy of Fawkes, followed by McGonagall, Daniel, Sirius, Remus, Lily and what seemed like the whole staff arriving by broomstick. Lily dashed over to them the fastest, James' name tearing from her lips and disappearing with the wind over the side of the castle. Her hands came up to her mouth in horror and she turned away, hugging Daniel tightly to her as he ran up.

Dumbledore assessed the situation and quickly sent McGonagall, Sprout and Snape off to round up their houses and get them settled,

however unlikely it was, in their common rooms and dormitories. Flitwick didn't budge at the Headmaster's order, staying where he was. It would be McGonagall's job to gather his convocation of eagles and guide them back to their westward tower.

"What have you done Harry?" Dumbledore frowned, his whole demeanor deeply disapproving.

Hermione fell silent, her eyes wide beside Harry, who straightened his shoulders and lifted his chin. "Won the duel..." he answered stiffly. "Sir."

Dumbledore reached out and touched James lightly on the shoulder and, finding him sturdier than expected, he rested his hand there fully. "You've petrified him," Dumbledore said gravely. "A kind of petrifying I haven't seen before... unless..."

Harry spared the Headmaster a glance and felt a probing at the surface of his thoughts. He forced himself to remain relaxed and thought of his light breeze. Instantly he connected with it and knew Dumbledore kept skating around his purpose for entering his mind.

He gave Dumbledore cold hard eyes and raised a brow. Startled, the Headmaster stopped and the wind faded away. Intrusion and expulsion were both subtle.

"Finished?" he asked wryly.

Dumbledore peered intensely at him from over his spectacles. "Evidently."

"Good," Harry returned brusquely. "Now I really should be going."

"What did you do to Dad?" Daniel growled, glaring at Harry from over Lily's shoulder.

"I disabled him." Harry said coolly. "Don't worry, you'll get him back eventually. Professor Sprout has second years always working on a mandrake crop. Perhaps Professor Snape can brew the elixir to counter James' unfortunate state if you ask him nicely."

"I oughta hex you straight to--"

Harry laughed, cutting Daniel off abruptly. "You couldn't best me in a duel. Don't try me out of one."

Daniel steamed, turning red in the face and Harry turned away from him only to run into Sirius. Harry bumped into the taller man's chest and took a step back, rubbing his nose lightly. Sirius looked positively furious. He was mouthing something Harry couldn't hear.

He darted a look over the dog animagus' shoulder and saw Remus holding his wand up lightly in one hand with an amused expression on his face. The werewolf was holding his friend back from advancing further. When their eyes met, Remus' expression cooled and Harry took another step back before turning around.

That was when he noticed. He was surrounded; Daniel and Lily on the left, Dumbledore behind him, Remus and Sirius on the right with Luna and Hermione clustered with him in the middle. Harry glowered, his shoulders tensing.

"I really must be going," Harry insisted stiffly. "After all, I am no longer a student. I need to go down and pack my trunk and leave school property."

Dumbledore frowned. "I don't think so, Harry. We have some matters to settle first--"

"I'm going," Harry repeated firmly. "I don't have to stay. You are not in charge of me anymore, Headmaster." He glanced at the girls on either side of him. "Luna, Hermione, you can stay here or come with me back to the common room."

Dumbledore raised his wand. Harry hit him with an unexpected silent and wandless full body bind and marched over to the door before anybody could react. The door burst open before he reached it. Striding through it, the winds pushed him halfway down the first stairwell before the door slammed shut behind him. And though he strained his ears, he could not hear any following footsteps.

The floors were devoid of life. That is not to say however that it was lifeless, the portraits and suits of armor were gossiping worse than ever. Their voices filled the halls with a dull roar, a white noise so intense the buzzing was nearly distracting. When a few of them caught sight of Harry they spoke even louder.

Harry swept past them, ignoring their shouts and demands. A few ghosts drifted along in a whirl of translucent movement scandal-mongering in hushed voices. Peeves was the most vocal of them, but that wasn't a shock. The poltergeist was busily regaling and pantomiming the duel to rapt portraits and other ghosts.

Keeping his head down, Harry ducked into a side passageway going down two levels more than he needed to get past them. He backtracked up the first intersecting staircase and climbed it to the seventh floor hurrying down to the Ravenclaw tower. Several fourth years were peaking out of the portal when Harry strode into view. They all ducked back inside.

The librarian looked up in her portrait. "Password?"

"Adalbert Waffling."

The portrait swung open to a large cacophony of noise, the room was filled with the weight of sound. Harry slunk through and dozens of eyes spotted him. They nudged their friends and suddenly the volume dropped leaving a phantom buzzing. Harry paused at the edge of the portal, keeping the portrait from closing, poised for retreat.

"You're a Parselmouth!" a voice yelled out from the back, sounding scared.

Harry scowled in the direction of the voice. "Fuck off."

The students shrunk back in fear at the hissing quality of his words. Harry pushed through and climbed the stairs to the boys' dormitories. The door swung open at his approach and Harry crossed the threshold. The sight that met him made him smile.

Luna was helping Hermione climb through the window. Hermione lost her balance and fell on top of Luna with an oomph of surprise. She

scrambled up and helped Luna stand, then glanced up and gasped in embarrassment. Harry grinned at them.

"Harry!" Hermione said as Luna reached across her to pluck the broom from midair.

"How'd you guys get the broom?" he asked as the door swung shut and sealed itself from intruders with a squelching sound.

"Luna summoned it out from under Professor Snape when he was returning to the roof."

"He fell most spectacularly," Luna commented absently as she shrunk the broom and placed it in her robes.

"Luna," Harry said questioningly as he stopped in front of her. "Why was my getting expelled a good thing? You said approaching Daniel after charms was the time to do it but I don't see the good in this. I need to take my N.E.W.T.s they're all I got."

Luna stared at him unwaveringly, her big blue eyes unblinking. "The two plovers you must acquire are out of the school. You can't very well get to them if you are here wasting time."

"N.E.W.T.s are not a waste of time!" Hermione said scandalized. "They're the most important evaluation of our life determining the very careers we can pursue!"

Harry looked at Luna calculatingly. "Plovers mean Horcruxes don't they."

She nodded, tucking her wand behind her ear. "Sprechen sie deutsch?"

"Er... no."

"You'll need a translator spell then," Luna said simply pulling a torn piece of parchment from her robes.

She handed it to him. Harry took it and quickly unfolded it scanning the text.

Hermione took a peak over his shoulder and read behind him. He could smell the flowers that made up her shampoo as her hair fell over his arm. Harry breathed in deeply for a moment before glancing back at Luna.

"So you got me kicked out of school to find Voldemort's Horcruxes," he clarified.

"Ja."

Harry shook his head in disbelief. "Perfect. Just bloody well perfect. You know Luna, you're completely loony."

Luna laughed, Hermione kept shooting him concerned glances, and he was developing a headache. Harry took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. The door banged open; Harry whipped around, his wand held pointed at the intruder before he even had time to register who was coming in.

"I knew your reflexes were good," Professor Flitwick said, taking his hat out of the line of fire and holding under his arm. "Too bad I'm shorter than the average wizard or you'd have been spot on for my nose."

Harry dropped his wand and eyed his former Head of House. "What's going on?"

"I am... aha... here in my official capacity to tell you that the Headmaster would like to see you."

"And your unofficial?" Hermione asked, taking a step closer to Harry.

"You showed remarkable talent, Harry," Flitwick said, addressing the young wizard. "Quite unlike any I've ever seen including your brother and... aha... dare I say, the Headmaster himself. I'm sorry I never took the opportunity to find out for myself about you. Dumbledore told me you were a trouble maker and a liar, but with talents and compassion like yours, I fear Dumbledore is misspoken."

Harry cocked his head and frowned. "What I did wasn't an act of compassion."

Flitwick smiled and waved his wand casually conjuring four chairs. He beckoned everyone to take a seat. "Did you not include vindication for Miss Granger in the duel contract? Her name has been cleared and now your brother is facing a Ministry inquiry. It'll likely go nowhere with Dumbledore helming your brother's campaign but nevertheless it'll aha... leave people wondering."

"Why are you here?" Harry repeated warily.

Flitwick set his hat on his knee and looked Harry in the eye. "I want to be of assistance to you. Misjudging one of my eagles so badly has left me feeling shaken and; on the one hand allowing me to help you will make me feel less guilty for my previous wrongdoings, while on the other hand, allowing me to get to know you as I wish to do so. Perhaps one day to be worthy of being called a friend."

Harry raised his eyebrows in amusement. "That was pretty straight forward, Professor."

"Indeed," Flitwick squeaked. "Honesty, I feel is the best foot forward right now. Do you not agree?"

Harry nodded. Luna summoned Flitwick's hat from him, startling the tiny wizard. She examined the inside and plucked a white hamster from it. Hermione looked perplexed at the blonde witch's actions as did Harry. Luna conjured a bubble and placed the hamster inside. As an afterthought she created a little wheel and then placed the hat on her head.

"Er... Luna?" Harry asked. "What's--"

"I heard the bootplinky inside Professor Flitwick's hat. It said it was cramped, so I let it out. Of course I couldn't let it go just anywhere," she said, setting the bubble on the ground. The hamster took off running its bubble into the foot of the beds and trunks.

"Of course," Hermione said vaguely with a glazed look in her eye. She shook her head, clearing the cobwebs.

"Good show," Flitwick chortled. "Five points to Ravenclaw."

"Thank you, Professor," Luna said dreamily.

"Now Harry," Flitwick started, leaning forward. "Since the Headmaster has foolishly decided to aha... expel you I wanted to let you know you can always come to me for help. Honestly, I don't know what Dumbledore was thinking. You haven't even taken your N.E.W.T.s; how can you get yourself a decent job? Sure you have perfect O.W.L.s, but even so, you'd be hard pressed to land yourself a low level position at the ministry. You're far more likely to end up as a night guard there or at St. Mungo's and that's no way to live. No way to live at all."

"How can you help me, sir?"

"I would like to offer you a place to stay. My home in the country that I use during the summer, should do until you've managed to get your feet under you. Also if you are free I could help you on the weekends to study for your N.E.W.T.s. It would be tough, but luckily we've already started the last semester and I could easily garner your assignments, classwork, and homework from the other professors. I could tutor you either at my home or we could meet somewhere in Hogsmeade to partake in these lessons."

Harry considered Flitwick for a long time. The tiny professor just sat there somberly, waiting for the young wizard's verdict. Hermione looked like she wanted to tell him to take the offer, she was practically green with envy at the thought of private tutoring. Harry knew it would be hard work, but it was something he felt he couldn't let Dumbledore take from him.

"How would I sit them?"

"I would speak with the examiners and see if I could work you into their busy schedule somehow."

Harry looked to Hermione, then to Luna, before nodding to Flitwick. "Okay. I accept."

"Oh good," Flitwick said relieved. He conjured a quill and summoned a scrap of paper. He scratched down something and handed it over. "That is my Floo address and Apparition coordinates. I'm afraid my

Floo is communications only, not full travel. Partially for security reasons and partially because I enjoy Apparating over Flooing."

"I think they're both terrible ways to travel, sir."

Flitwick laughed. "Yes, yes, of course you're right, but I find popping from place to place to be a heck of a lot cleaner."

"Thank you, sir," Harry said, tucking the paper into his pocket.

"I'll Floo you later this evening to see that you got in all right," Flitwick said, standing up. The others copied him and he banished the chairs. "Girls, be sure to escort Harry to the front gates. Take as long as you need, you won't be deducted house points."

"Thank you, Professor," Luna said, picking up the hamster and handing it to him. "The bootplinky wishes to go with you."

Flitwick smiled. "Yes, dear, I'll be sure to give him a proper home. My hat, though, if you will."

Luna took it off and returned it. Flitwick placed it on his head and left, closing the door behind him.

"I guess this is it," Harry said, shaking his head. "I really am expelled."

"It's not too bad," Hermione said tentatively, unsure of his reaction. "At least you'll still be able to sit your N.E.W.T.s."

Harry nodded and gestured with his wand at his few belongings strewn around his bed. The miscellaneous objects flew into his trunk and the lid slammed down the lock clicking into place.

"I'll leave you here, Harry," Luna said, leaning up and kissing him on the cheek. "Do watch out for the sedaeraths."

Harry smiled bemusedly and watched her flounce away. Hermione stayed rooted on the spot, her face flushed.

"Thank you for clearing my name," she whispered softly, watching him with big brown eyes.

Harry nodded, stubbing his toe into his trunk. "Any time."

"Harry," Hermione began hesitantly.

Harry looked up. She dug into her robes and pulled out the two mirrors he'd left by her bed the other night. She held one aloft and gestured at him with it.

"Please, take it. I want you to have it."

Harry accepted the mirror and placed it in his robes. "I had wanted to be the one you gave it to," he said, remembering when he had first purchased them after opening his bank account.

"I wanted you to have it too," Hermione said simply.

She bit her lip as if contemplating something. Harry watched fascinated despite himself. Oblivious to anything else, she leaned forward and it was too late; her lips pressed lightly against his and he sucked in a shocked breath. Heat sizzled all the way down to his toes and his hands crept to her hips unknowingly.

Hermione pressed herself into his arms and Harry held her tightly. Her tongue darted into his mouth, hesitant and eager all at once. She was reclaiming him, he thought vaguely in the back of his mind, as he was her.

She stood up on her toes, clutching his head, making the kiss deeper. She drank him in like a person who'd been thirsting in the desert only to be granted an oasis. Thoughts spun wildly out of his head just like with their first kiss until he knew time not.

A cool place in Harry filled with warmth, as if it had only been waiting for this. The image of her kissing Daniel this way stopped him. The warmth rapidly fled as Harry grabbed her arms and removed them from around his neck.

"Too much, too fast," he whispered hoarsely, releasing her and stepping back.

Her eyes filled with tears as she nodded. "You should get going, then," she said bravely.

"Hermione," he said unthinkingly. She looked up at him with hope glimmering behind her tears. He was struck again with how delicate and beautiful she was. "I--I--"

She looked away, clasping her trembling hands in front of her. "You won't mind if I don't join you do you? I don't think I could bear watching you leave."

"I'm sorry," Harry finished lamely, picking up his trunk. "I'll call you."

"The password's Serion."

Suddenly, Harry felt his throat thicken and he swallowed past the emotion. "Thank you," he said, turning to leave.

"I'll send Hedwig to you," Hermione promised as he quit the room.

Then he was down the stairs and past the portrait before he even realized his feet were taking him anywhere. The walk out of the castle was his longest and most miserable experience. The portraits still gossiped and the suits of armor clanked loudly behind him. Harry averted his gaze until he reached the second floor.

He angled down to the girls' bathroom and met the empty bathroom with despondency. He felt so cut off from everything and everyone. A sad pyrrhic victory.

He called the Chamber to open and walked down the stairs to the feeding chamber below. A sleeping Oorjit rested curled on the floor in his nest. All around, everything felt hallow. Harry looked at the door to the main opening and thought for the wildest moment that maybe he could seek refuge here in the castle, before he shook his head clear.

§Oorjit, I'm leaving,§ Harry called down.

Oorjit raised his head blearily focusing on Harry before him. He thumped his tail on the ground. §All right, see you when you get back.§

Harry shook his head, holding aloft his lightened trunk. §For good, Oorjit. I've been kicked out of Hogwarts.§

§What?§ the occamy hissed, flapping his wings in agitation. §You've been expelled?§

Harry nodded. §I dueled with Daniel. I won.§

§I'm coming with you,§ Oorjit declared, waking up fully and jumping up into the air.

§I was hoping you'd say that,§ Harry said, feeling relieved.

Oorjit landed on Harry's shoulder, a tad too heavy to sit there comfortably. They found an alternative and the occamy rode wrapped around his back, his wings a small compact lump on the underside of Harry's robes.

Harry walked up and closed off the Chamber, locking the opening with the password being Serion's name, same as the mirrors. He looked around the stalls once, missing Myrtle's dour presence poignantly, before departing and quickly navigating to the Great Hall where he found Dumbledore waiting for him.

"Packed, are you?" Dumbledore asked as Harry slowed down.

"Yes," Harry replied tersely. "Seeing me off, are you?"

Dumbledore nodded. Gesturing to the corridor, Harry followed the tall old wizard to the front doors. Dumbledore unlocked them and gave Harry an obscure look.

"You can still join the Order. It's not too late."

"Bridges, Headmaster," Harry replied stiffly, "bridges."

"Yes," Dumbledore said stroking his beard. "I guess they're all but ashes now."

"Sir."

"I'm truly sorry for this, Harry, but you left me no choice."

"You had choices," Harry returned glaring up at Dumbledore. "You just chose wrongly."

Dumbledore said nothing and opened the doors. Harry stepped out quickly and felt the Headmaster's gaze upon him all the way down to the front gates. It started raining and Harry hurried to the boats. He spun around at the last second gazing up at Hogwarts.

It sat there glittering on the hill and Harry could picture it the way he remembered seeing it the very first time from the lake on top of the cliffs these hills turned into. New beginnings he had thought then; broken promises he thought now.

Turning, he crossed the wards and walked down the path through the opening in the forest. A figure broke free of the woods, startling Harry. He drew his wand.

The hooded figure stopped and raised his hands in a sign of peace. Warily, Harry lowered his wand, keeping it out for the time being.

"You've not returned my Lord's last message. His patience is at an end and he requests that you meet with him in person."

"I'm afraid the likelihood of that is as low as my reinstatement into Hogwarts."

Another figure stepped out of the forest and tossed a small object at Harry. Harry jumped backwards to avoid catching it and fell over his trunk, landing heavily on the floor.

"That'll be pretty likely then, won't it guv'nor," said the new comer, tossing another object at Harry.

It fell on his chest, the familiar pull of a Portkey tugging behind his navel alerted Harry to the trouble that he was in.

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 35°«««°»»»

Chapter 36

Harry slammed into the ground face first, his arms and legs jumbled into a contorted mess. He heard his nose crunch sickeningly from the force of impact. Gasping, he wheezed through his mouth as he struggled to stand, colliding with his trunk. Finally, he managed to right himself.

Blood dripped down his face from his broken nose. He quickly held a hand up to staunch the flow. He quickly shrunk his trunk and stuffed it in his robes. Staring at the blank stretch of wall Harry wondered where the hell he was when the sound of another portkey arrival behind him drew his attention.

Looking across the grandiose room, the sudden arrival of the Death Eaters seemed far less worrisome; a wizard stood hunched over a large table in front of a throne-like chair. Voldemort glanced up from the papers he was perusing, lifting a sardonic brow before gently setting them aside and walking forward.

"Welcome to my humble lair," Voldemort said graciously spreading out his hands.

Harry took a wary step back, dropping the hand holding his nose and going for his wand. Voldemort waved his hand in dismissal as it came into view.

"Now, none of that. I'm not going to harm you." He examined Harry and pulled out his own wand. Harry raised his slightly. "Though where are my manners? *Episkey*."

Harry's nose shifted back into alignment with a nauseating squelch. He raised a hand quickly and found it perfect. His new robes however were unredeemable and that irked him. Good money--wasted!

"We can't have you covered in blood, now can we?" Voldemort said amused.

He beckoned to the new arrivals and told them to bring new robes for Harry. They hurried to do his bidding, moving away like ants on a

mission, which Harry supposed they were. They left silently and swiftly.

Voldemort turned back to Harry, smiling winningly. Harry gazed hard at the wizard before him, trying to discern his sudden change in character. He was too considering and too charming to be anything but fake. Especially since he resembled a snake more than human anything else.

"Follow me, Harry," Voldemort commanded, turning his back on him.

Harry felt foolish with his wand still raised and hesitantly lowered it. He wouldn't be so foolish as to put it away. Cautiously he followed the tall wizard through a set of doors that shimmered into view as Voldemort approached them.

When Voldemort went through them, Harry followed, holding his wand at the ready in case this was a trap. Of course it was all a trap, he thought vaguely, crossing the threshold. He came to a sudden stop as he looked in awe.

Voldemort turned and smiled engagingly, pointy teeth and all. "How does my private lab compare with the ones at Hogwarts?"

Harry just nodded dumbly, gazing around at the potions lab. Cauldrons were bubbling on polished blue counters, there were thirteen in total he saw. Windows charmed to depict any type of weather blazed in full glory of a sunny afternoon, lighting the room in a way that every bit glassware glittered and every surface shone gaily. Cabinets filled with finished potions, ingredients, and tools ran along the perimeter of the room and there in the middle stood Voldemort, the wizard the whole wizarding world feared to even think his name let alone speak it, examining a frothy pink potion.

The sight caused Harry to choke back a snort. Instantly, he felt more at ease and suddenly realizing this must have been the intended result, stiffened up immediately. Voldemort replaced the ladle into the potion and stirred it anti-clockwise a few times before adding a pinch of something sliced beside it. The potion bubbled bright yellow before settling down into an orange-pink combination.

"It's quite impressive," Harry offered, glancing around again before focusing on the most dangerous thing in the room. "Certainly better than Snape's labs in the dungeons."

"Quite," Voldemort agreed, turning to the next potion, his black robes billowing softly at the movement.

Harry watched for a moment while Voldemort puttered around. It sounded odd even describing what he was seeing let alone witnessing. "Why am I here?"

Voldemort turned down the fire underneath the cauldron and glanced up mockingly. "You've been ignoring my letters. At first, I thought it was because you were hesitant about raising Dumbledore's already high suspicions of your involvement with me--oh yes--" he said at Harry's surprised look. "--I have informants within the castle who have his ear. The old fool thinks he's clever, he tries playing things with me like we were at a game of chess."

"He seems to have been winning a little with that tactic," Harry replied as a knock sounded at the door.

"He's won a few pawns, perhaps a knight, I must admit," Voldemort snarled, before quickly soothing his features and continuing calmly. "He won't be taking any of the bigger pieces, however, let alone the king. Enter Friskin."

A masked Death Eater came into the room, Harry could only assume the wizard's name was Friskin. Voldemort took the bundle of black cloth and unfurled it with a flick of his hands. A careful eye looked for any flaws before he nodded and sent the Death Eater away with a brisk command.

"Take these," Voldemort directed, handing the uncut material to him and gestured out the door. "Go down the hall and in the first doorway on the left, you'll find the toilets. Change; the fabric will automatically tailor itself to your form, then return. You have five minutes."

Harry took the cloth suspiciously and edged toward the door. Just as he was about to leave, Voldemort warned him not to try to escape, his friendly demeanor shifting to show his true, manipulating self. It

left his features as quickly as it came but Harry wasn't fooled. He left, shutting the door behind him and looked out at the hallway he found himself in, the grandiose hall and throne nowhere to be seen.

It was dark and cool with flickering sconces decorating the wall every few feet. Harry turned to the right and padded softly down the corridor examining the wall. He was underground, if the roughness of the stones indicated anything. It also meant he was more likely in a castle of some sort. A refurbished one, if the smooth white and wooden walls from earlier were anything to go by.

He passed several doors on the right that were shut and locked tight. Harry gave up trying to jiggle one open three doors down and hurried a little more. There was nobody in sight, but Harry still had the eerie feeling he was being watched. He finally came to the door on the left near the end of the hall and quickly stepped inside.

§It's safe to talk, Oorjit,§ Harry hissed quietly, shutting the door and turning around.

The bathroom was as grandiose as the throne room. Regal and opulent; there was a large pool like bath and a long low counter above which hung an ornate mirror and tapestries with gold filament all along the walls. Harry got the feeling that this was a private bathroom, despite there being no personal items strewn out in the open.

§Where are we?§ Oorjit said against his back, his tongue tickling his skin.

§Voldemort's hideaway lair.§

He opened the only furniture in the room, a bulky wardrobe and saw inside a stack of plush dark green towels, a few bottles that seemed to be shampoo potions and a locked box. Harry shut the wardrobe and faced the room.

§Hang on, I'm going to try popping out of here,§ Harry said softly, dropping the robes he was holding and spun on his foot.

His Apparition attempt failed as a superior pressure forced him to remain where he was. He felt his ears pop. Harry huffed in agitation and quickly tore his ruined robes off him and grabbed the pool of fabric on the ground.

Oorjit stretched and let go of his waist, flapping his wings to gain air. §That was pretty slick. You got us right back where we started. §

§Give me a break, § Harry grouched holding up his material at arm's length.

§You could do it at Hogwarts, § Oorjit returned. §You nearly drowned yourself because of it. §

§I was being chased by Dumbledore. §

§You're being chased by Voldemort now. §

§No, § Harry hissed, shaking his head and glancing down at the cloth. §I don't think I am. He wants me to join him. §

§And that makes it impossible to leave? §

Harry nodded thoughtfully. §Perhaps. I think, if I am honest with myself, I do want to hear what he says. §

He examined the black fabric for any negative spells and charm work. It appeared to be normal self-tailoring cloth so he brought it to his chest trying to figure out how to activate it.

That was all the fabric needed apparently as it started vibrating. It leapt up measuring him against itself for his length as well as his width before snippets of the fabric started falling away to litter the floor. It wrapped around him and a few more pieces fell away.

It circled him and silver thread appeared midair and started sewing. The invisible needle poked his shoulder once and Harry winced. The fabric tightened warningly before the pieces on the floor rose up and started fusing together into long wide cuffs. The cuffs slid over his arms and the needle pulled them together, sewing them onto the

torso. A second set of thread and needle started sewing the hemline and cuffs, cutting off the ragged ends of the fabric and thread.

Oorjit examined him from his spot on the marble slab counters. §You don't look terrible,§ he determined.

The material finished its work and a silver design appear in midair. Harry examined the eagle that was displayed but he shook his head. The design morphed into another, this one a lion and again he shook his head. A badger quickly appeared before cycling over into a snake. Harry looked at it thoughtfully before shaking his head and requesting something more magical. A dragon, phoenix, and griffin were all dismissed before it stopped once again awaiting instructions.

"Perhaps a basilisk?" Harry inquired and the silver design shimmered into an impressive image of a male basilisk.

Harry nodded and the design shifted onto his back where the silver thread started to create it. He waited patiently for it to finish before standing before the mirrors to take in his presence.

§You know, I think you may be right, Oorjit,§ Harry said, turning one way then another, observing himself in the mirror.

He was quite pleased with the outcome, staring at his well tailor robes. The charms on the material were done by the best in the business, the sheer style of cut and handiwork were topnotch. He looked good, even with the red stripe of hair. The robes just brought it out, emphasizing his uniqueness and good bone structure.

§I guess we should head back and talk to old snake face then,§ Harry said finishing up his perusal.

Oorjit flapped his wings and landed on Harry's shoulder in a pile of coils. Tucking his wings to his body, the occamy slithered down the neck of Harry's robes. Harry endured the creepy crawly sensation as Oorjit settled against his back once more, his tail curling firmly around Harry's waist.

Once Oorjit settled into place, Harry grabbed his trunk from the ruined robes and stuffed it into the new before he banished his old robes,

deciding he didn't need them anymore and left the opulent bathroom. He strolled leisurely down the corridor back to the potions lab when a Death Eater popped into existence. The easy appearance made Harry frown. He had to find a way around the wards. It was no good that a common Death Eater could do it when he could not, even if the Death Eater was programmed into the wards.

"My Lord is not pleased," the Death Eater intoned darkly.

"Yeah?"

"He said you lingered too long for his liking."

"He'll have to deal," Harry said boldly, straightening upright. "Is he still in the lab?"

The Death Eater shook his head and sneered, "He's gone to his private dining hall. You are to follow me."

Harry waved him on imperiously and proceeded after the angry minion. He considered heckling the wizard before summarily dismissing the idea. Too easy.

They halted in their progress before an elevator similar to those at the Ministry. Harry waited while the gears engaged and the shaft appeared. The Death Eater waited for Harry to climb in before coming onboard. Harry watched as the wizard pressed an anonymous black button which closed the iron gates.

The elevator lurched upon closing and they barreled through the walls, up and down, and sideways until Harry felt dizzy and lost. The only thing he sensed was how large the place was; the lair was bigger than the Ministry but felt smaller than Hogwarts. The lair was impressive and obviously brimming with a dark magical presence that Harry felt was similar to Voldemort's own particular brand of energy.

"We're here," the Death Eater said needlessly as the gates swung open and Harry stepped off.

They were now in an icy blue corridor with frosted windows. The black night lay beyond them, no moon or stars. The light in the hall

was being suffocated before it could shine . The whole scene was sinister.

Harry became tenser and proceeded to walk in front of the Death Eater to hide his increasing anxiety. The Dark Lord wished to speak with him about the letters of recruitment, which suddenly felt more like conscription in this gloomy hall. He walked purposefully down the halls running possible ideas through his mind on how to make a quick escape.

A cough sounded behind him and Harry stopped, glaring at the masked wizard; the Death Eater was simply standing and waiting for him to open the door. But though the Death Eater's mask hid all expression, Harry could just feel the waves of smug superiority roll off the man and it grated on his nerves.

The Death Eater knocked on the door, waiting for permission to enter. A hissing call sounded through the walls and the wizard took this as assent. He opened the door and waved Harry through mockingly. Harry sneered at the masked face and swept by him.

Voldemort awaited inside, sitting at the end of the small table. Harry came to a stop just inside the doorway. From his spot Harry counted six other chairs, noticing the end chair wasn't positioned where it should be, instead the second high backed chair was sitting catty-cornered to Voldemort's. Obviously, that was where Voldemort wanted him. Voldemort himself sat at the end of the table lazily, watching him closely.

§Take a seat, Harry,§ Voldemort invited, waving Harry to the other end seat.

Harry slowly trudged over, weary of what he was to find.

A large albino snake with red eyes stared at him idly was revealed, sitting curled up on Voldemort's lap, when he reached his seat. The snake, Nagini, Harry suspected, preened under Voldemort's attentions. Voldemort watched him take in the presence of Nagini, scrutinizing his every reaction. Harry took his seat and waited in silence, watching Voldemort's long slender fingers stroke the crown of the snake's head.

§How do you like your robes?§ he asked when Harry had situated himself.

§They're very nice.§

§Much better than your brother's hand-me-downs, no?§

Harry raised an eyebrow inquiringly. §The state of my robes interested you? Who's your informant? They obviously are not doing a good job since those were one of my new robes that I purchased in Diagon Alley.§

Voldemort hid any reaction behind a gently mocking smirk. §Yes, well, I will be speaking with them later. Don't you worry.§

§Master,§ Nagini hissed, raising her head above the table. §I want to smell the boy.§

§Back off,§ Harry growled down at the snake. §You're not getting any closer to me than you already are.§ He flipped his attention back to Voldemort and raised his chin. §Now why don't you quit playing nice, you don't do it very well and tell me what it is you kidnapped me here for.§

§So demanding,§ Voldemort mocked, pushing Nagini's head back down on top of her coiled body. She let out a huff, irritated, but stayed silent. §I am of course, offering you the chance to join me, to combine our strengths, to become more powerful than you can imagine.§

Harry stared hard at the space between Voldemort's eyes; being firm while avoiding the chance of having Leglimency being used on him was tough. He felt a little silly. The silent admission settled in his stomach as the silence stretched.

§So silent, Potter,§ Voldemort murmured, stroking Nagini. He tilted his head to the side. §You have the king of serpents on the back of your robes. Do you consider yourself above me? That is a bold claim and not a wise one to be taking.§

§What gives you claim to call yourself king of serpents?§ Harry asked putting venom into it. §You claim so many things and yet time and again you've been bested by--§

§You?§ Voldemort inserted oily.

§--the Boy-Who-Lived,§ Harry concluded, defiantly. §Just because you can speak the snakes' language doesn't make you master of them.§

§Wrong,§ Voldemort hissed with finality, startling Harry with his forcefulness. §I am Salazar Slytherin's--§

§Heir?§ Harry scoffed. §Yeah, you told me.§

Voldemort's nostrils flared and he locked eyes with Harry who had shifted his gaze just a fraction. It was enough. A raging inferno sliced through his misdirecting wind, eating it up, using it as fuel to batter past the shifting winds. The fire slammed into Harry's third layer of protection, flaring.

Harry struggled to hold the gale in place, using his winds to wrap Voldemort's fire into a swirling cyclone of heat. Inside he felt scorched and the heat only made his concentration worse. Spots of vision flashed before him.

Harry could see Nagini rising above her master's lap and flopping onto the table. Fire cut off his view of her as the fiery twister seared his vision and pulled him back into the mental warfare. Feeling more helpless than ever under the onslaught pissed him off. He had worked too long on creating those three layers to just let them fall apart now.

He pushed his will to succeed into his winds, building the gale up, putting more power into its winds, struggling against the scorching fire. The influx of wind didn't blow out the fire like he had hoped, to Harry it looked like he had supplied more fuel for burning.

He could hear a high pitched chortle in his ears and his vision flashed again. Nagini was almost on him--there was nothing he could do! He

saw her jaw open wide, light flashing off her fangs as she prepared to lunge before he was jerked back into the battle.

Gasping, Harry struggled for breath in the oxygen deprived world when a thought came to him. He dropped his windstorm, smothering the fiery tower. It felt as a shower of sparks, raining down on him. Harry stifled the air, he heard a roar of rage, as he closed off the air, hiding it from Voldemort.

He was thrown back suddenly against his chair, the fight for his memories over with as Nagini collided with his chest, knocking him over. Oorjit let out a garbled hiss, jerking furiously out of his robes and taking flight. His wings clipped Voldemort in the head before he pulled them in and dived at the giant serpent tangled with Harry.

Oorjit cackled as he plummeted, §Die flubber worm! Die!§

§I will enjoy eating you--ahh!!§ Nagini shrieked as Oorjit hit her, his jaws flashing.

The tumbling snakes fell off Harry and he called for his wand, grasping the slender wood as it hit his palm. Harry angled it at Voldemort's nose and back up to the wall only a few feet away. Voldemort sat there his face once more controlled as he watched the snakes fighting on the floor. He didn't seem to notice Harry or the wand pointed at his head, but Harry was certain that he had.

"Stay out of my mind," Harry shouted over the loud hissing and spitting on the floor.

"I have the right to your memories when you claim I've said something to you I can't recall ever saying to you," Voldemort said with a cold finality.

"The hell you do!"

"When and how did I tell you I was Slytherin's Heir?"

Harry felt the pull in those words. It was obvious to Harry that he shouldn't mention the diary or cup, so he improvised, sneering, "It's understandable, any Parselmouth would."

"Put your wand up, Mr. Potter," Voldemort commanded, his left hand going for his right cuff. Harry held his more firmly in his hand, keeping it aimed it right at Voldemort's head.

"Keep your hands on the table," Harry demanded hoarsely.

Smirking, Voldemort complied, resting his hands palm up on the table. "As you wish," he said silkily.

He jerked his wrists and two wands appeared in either hand, Harry blocked two disarming hexes with a quick protego. Harry threw a reducto at the table, blasting it apart, sending shards into Voldemort's face. In a blink of an eye Voldemort disappeared, fading from view. Harry recognized the disillusionment charm and quickly cast one on himself.

Shuffling away from where he had been, Harry leapt over the fighting snakes just as the wall where he'd been exploded in a shower of dust. A ten foot hole appeared where the dust cleared, revealing another hallway.

"I remember fighting you," Voldemort's voice hissed through the room. "All school yard jinxes with a few well placed ten-galleon dark curses and hexes for good measure. Typical and predictable."

"Worked the first time, though didn't it?"

"You had Dumbledore doing all the heavy work and then that wild bit of magic to knock both of us off our feet. I won't be toying with you a second time."

"You mean underestimate me!"

"You're playing with the big boys now. Adapt or die. *Integrum caecus!*"

"*Bullintera!*" Harry cried out using his free hand to yank his chair into the path of the blinding curse. The chair obliterated into a shower of dust.

A sneering chuckle reverberated in his ears. "I see that one ten-galleon dark spell and raise you a infinitely more potent example of it: *Bullicruour!*"

Harry dodged it and it slammed into the wall behind him, burrowing into it, leaving behind a small round pockmark. "*Ruptura viscus!*" he shouted, aiming toward a shimmer of movement in the corner.

An unknown spell came from the opposite side of the room, Harry blocked it with another chair.

"Your knowledge of the dark arts is at best banal, first year Slytherins know their curses better than you do. Try changing them, modifying them for arsenal-- *Rupturacrania!*"

Harry used another chair to intercept the curse. It exploded outward in a shower of fine wooden slivers. He cast a bubblehead charm, clearing his air and protecting his face.

"*Constansagonia!*" he bellowed, aiming the curse where the last spell had come from, moving away from where he'd been right before another spell impacted where he had just stood.

"Oh are we moving on now to the mental tortures? I like those-- *mentalisdolus!*"

Harry dived under the table, using it for coverage. The spell collided with the wall, lighting up the whole room. He could just make out a shadowy outline of a figure before it disappeared. He swiveled his head one way then the other on the lookout.

The pair of snakes tumbled into him from behind, their angry hisses vying for his attention. Nagini's long snapping fangs flashed in the light of another spell. Harry hit her with a lockjaw hex. Oorjit laughed at the python's state launching into a fresh attack. Harry shoved their bodies away from him, getting clipped in the head by Oorjit's wings for his troubles.

"*Conjurus gladius,*" Harry whispered, drawing a blade from thin air, holding his wand aloft. He made the sword invisible with a thought and hoisted it higher.

He peaked out from under the table and a spell crashed into the surface making it groan. Harry ducked out from under the last of his protection just as a splitter hex sliced through it. He ran to the wall, dodging the pair of dueling snakes. He vaguely registered Nagini speaking again when another splitter carved out a chunk of stone.

He swerved away from it and launched himself into the air, pointing his sword hand down, casting a silent levitation charm. The spellfire ceased as he rose in the air, Harry had a feeling Voldemort was trying to spot him on the ground. Using that to his advantage Harry rose higher, hiding himself in the shadowy ceiling.

From his spot in the corner, he panted, catching his breath. Up in the air, he could make out Voldemort who was approaching the hole in the wall cautiously. He must have thought Harry had left the room and gone out into the hall. Harry aimed his wand and held it steady, waiting for the perfect time to strike.

§Harry,§ Voldemort taunted, peering back into the room. §Come out, come out, wherever you are.§

Harry refused to be baited.

§I know you're in here,§ Voldemort heckled his voice bouncing around the room, dropping his disillusionment charm. §I'll even go easier on you. See I'm visible again? How's that? Is that fair?§

Harry cast an unbreakable charm and a self-sharpening charm on the sword. Quietly with minimal movement he used his wand to levitate the weapon into the air. Under the guise of the hissing snakes he directed the sword down behind Voldemort's figure with soft hissing directions.

§Or should I also drop a wand?§ Voldemort hissed maliciously. §One wand and visible is more than fair,§ he said, banishing his second wand with a flick from the first.

§Stab him,§ Harry ordered softly at the sword when it was positioned directly behind Voldemort's tall proud figure and watched the air distort around Voldemort as the blade slashed the air impaling the unaware wizard.

A high pitched yell of pain roared through the air. Voldemort wrenched the sword out of his chest and held the bloody blade aloft, fury raging in his red eyes.

§Show yourself Potter!§ Voldemort hissed, spittle flying from his mouth. §Show yourself, you cowardly mudblood!§

Oorjit cackled wickedly, drawing Harry's attention to the two snakes thrashing on the ground just a little below him. Oorjit's jaw clamped down on Nagini's head in triumph. He threw his head back in the air biting down on Nagini's writhing body.

The female snake was swallowed in thick guzzling chomps, her downward descent visible. Oorjit flapped his wings, fighting the last of the dying snake's efforts to stay alive. Voldemort's sensing the end of his familiar switched his attention to the feeding occamy.

A wordless bellow ripped from Voldemort's throat as he came down upon Oorjit. Harry dropped from the ceiling, landing in a crouch. He dropped his disillusionment charm and ran head first toward Voldemort, mindlessly conjuring a solid shield.

The sword clanged against the shield, the force of the blow knocking Harry back a few feet. Harry grit his teeth as the sword came crashing down again. He was sweating, pushing against the force of Voldemort's blow as Oorjit gulp down the last of the large albino snake.

§You will know death!§ Voldemort vowed, shoving Harry aside with a powerful burst of magic. Harry fell to the ground, his shield spiraling away, his wand held in his grip only by sheer will.

He pulled himself up off the floor in time to watch Voldemort bear down on Oorjit. The occamy glared defiantly up at his murderer, his belly full, snapping back smugly. Harry summoned Oorjit just as the blade swung down, wedging itself into the ground below. Voldemort spun around, his red eyes focusing on Harry.

§You can't escape, Potter,§ he hissed, stalking toward them. §You've got nowhere to go, nowhere to hide.§

Harry clung to Oorjit tightly, ignoring the disgruntled occamy's protest. He pointed his wand at Voldemort and clambered to his feet, swaying awkwardly under Oorjit's newfound bulk.

§Good-bye,§ Harry said firmly, taking a step back.

§Good-bye?§ Voldemort hissed incredulously. §Where do you think you're going? Somewhere I can't find you?§

§Something like that,§ Harry grimaced and spun around, forcing his way through the Apparition barriers with a deafening crack.

All he needed to get away had been the right incentive after all.

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 36°«««°»»»°

Chapter 37

He squeezed into existence on the front step of a small little cottage, gasping for breath as he fell against the front door. His head was swimming from the pressure of being compressed through the Anti-Apparition wards. Oorjit was beating his wings frantically, and braining Harry with every flap did not help. Harry let Oorjit go with a groan and pushed himself up off the door jam.

§No more popping!§ Oorjit protested vehemently, landing on the ground a few feet away. §It is most decidedly unpleasant--especially on a full stomach!§

§It was twice as unpleasant as it should have been because of the anti- apparition wards.§

§Where are we?§

§Professor Flitwick's home, if I got the coordinates correct.§

§Well did you?§ the occamy hissed irritably. §I'm ready for a nice long nap--it's good for my digestion.§

§Considering who you ate, I wouldn't be surprised if you got indigestion anyway,§ Harry murmured pointing his wand at the front door. "Alohomora."

The door didn't click open. Figures his professor would have used something far more superior to a third-year spell. Harry gave a disgruntled sighed and jiggled the lock.

§Open,§ he hissed and the door sprung back, revealing the interior of the small home.

He gestured to Oorjit to follow him inside. Carefully he held stepped over the threshold avoiding a well placed booby-trap that hadn't been deactivated with the Parseltongue magic and turned his wand on the light sconces. They flared to life bathing the interior in a warm yellow glow. Harry sighed in appreciation looking at the overstuffed couch and heavily padded furniture.

He mused at the color scheme though--it was decorated in Slytherin colors, not Ravenclaw, like he had expected; Flitwick being an alumni of the house as well as its Head. Perhaps the diminutive professor preferred the dark green to dark blue, it was the only explanation Harry cared to give. He pulled out his shrunken trunk and tapped it with a *finite incantatem*. It grew in his hand until he was forced to place it on the ground as the feather-light wore off with its growth and it became too heavy to hold.

An angry hoot alerted Harry to the danger he was in. He glanced up and through the small window between the cabinets and counter that cordoned off the kitchen from the rest of the living room. Hedwig glared at him clearly irked; Harry shrugged her off and bent to open his trunk.

He plucked out a pair of pajama bottoms and padded softly around the place looking for the bathroom. Finding it nestled between the common room and the only bedroom he ducked in for a quick shower and a scrub.

Flitwick's bathroom was different than any he'd ever been to before, he could only stop and stare. The sink and counter were low slung along the western wall of the magically expanded room. The shower was as tiny as Hagrid's was sure to be big, but the tub sunk into the floor and looked like a small lake. Knobs decorated the walls, covering every inch of space available and even then doubling up on themselves. Harry couldn't imagine what they did.

It was apparent that the diminutive professor had a penchant for bathing and regular hygiene. Perhaps more so than anyone would normally exhibit but a quality that was admirable. Now if only he could figure out how to make the bath work.

Harry tried several knobs and levers, pushing and tugging on each in turn. Several ominous groaning sounds lead to nothing and still the bath was unfilled. He cursed his Head of House softly under his breath and turned toward the sink.

With a sigh he filled the sink placing the stopper in the drain; thankful for having a normal enough sink to deal with. Grabbing the small hand towel at the side he wet it and proceeded to give himself a

scrub down. It would have to do, he thought, wringing out the towel and soaking it once more with the lukewarm water.

Unsatisfied with the whole experience, he left the bathroom after tugging on his bottoms, padding tiredly into the common room. His head was starting to throb and the adrenaline crash sapped all the strength from his limbs. He was tired and wanted nothing more than to curl up and sleep.

Oorjit, he found to his dismay, had laid curled up against the plush cushions on the plump couch, leaving him very little room to lie down. The little spitfire was snoring lightly, his head tucked under one wing, his fat belly swollen and distended. Harry shoved the occamy over and sat himself down on the cushions, sinking gratefully into their pleasant warmth.

Oorjit grumbled, his tongue flicking out lazily in his sleep as Harry stretched out, maneuvering the snake's position once more as he got comfortable. Throwing one hand toward the fireplace, Harry started a fire which blazed bright before settling into a cozy crackling, its light dancing around the room. Harry put out the sconces and the room darkened dramatically.

He sighed appreciatively and plumped a soft cushion into a pillow. Ignoring the lingering aches and pains in his body from the forced Apparition he closed his eyes. As he drifted to sleep Oorjit mumbled softly in his own about tasty pythons.

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Harry grimaced in pain the next morning as a series of sharp somethings dug into his skin; squeezing his eyes shut from the bright light filtering through the room he refused to be moved. The source of his torment let out a shrill hoot in his ear, deafening him for a few moments afterwards as he sat up abruptly and clutched his head.

"Ow, girl," he growled, rubbing his aching scar. "Keep the racket down. I've got a massive headache."

Hedwig hooted again shooting him an angry glare before launching into flight. She hit him with her wings as she flew past, making it clear

she was still upset. Harry rubbed the tender spot for a moment before fixing his glasses back onto his face; they had fallen to the floor at some point in the night.

Just then a distinct voice called out, "Hallo? Hallo? Harry? Are you there?"

Harry dragged himself into a sitting position and waved blearily to the face in the fire. "I'm here," he told his anxious professor getting up and walking around the couch to sit down by the hearth. "What is it?"

Flitwick looked relieved at the sight of him and said, "I was checking in on you, making sure you got in all right. I take it that you found the place okay?"

Harry nodded, stuffing a yawn with his fist. "Yes, sir."

"Good. You should know," he stated conspiratorially, leaning closer. "That the whole school is in an uproar. I have never seen everyone all a tizzy like this except for when the Triwizard Tournament came through and your brother became the fourth champion."

"Yeah?" Harry asked rhetorically.

Flitwick nodded. "Students are fractured right down the middle between supporting your brother and you. Half of them think what you did was and I will quote here, 'Bloody Awesome!'"

"The other half?"

Flitwick sighed. "I'm afraid they think you cheated and don't deserve to have won the duel. They're being very malicious in their attacks upon your character on top of it."

"At least half of the school is rooting for me. That's more than I've ever had before. The professors?"

"Snape seems to be coming around to our side, albeit grudgingly. I think it's just because you whipped Daniel and James so thoroughly. He's been wanting to see someone do it for a long time. He has quite a bit of animosity from back in school because of your dad."

"Well dad's disowning me," Harry said with a shrug, scratching at the new growth of hair on his chin. "Said so right before I petrified him."

Shocked, Flitwick stammered out, "Are you aha... sure? Maybe he didn't mean it?"

Harry shook his head. "Nope, the pigheaded baboon practically gloated it to me. Overly upset that I ruined poor Dan-Dan's reputation as the best in Defense Against the Dark Arts."

"If he disowns you..." Flitwick said softly, his eyes unfocusing as the ramifications of such an act ran through his head.

"He's making a big mistake," Harry answered. "Can you imagine what the Malfoys will say to him when it's finally done? 'Fine Pureblood stock and he disowns the boy in favor of the one who is more squib than wizard.' They'll rip him to shreds."

Flitwick stared at the malicious smirk before shaking his head. "You're right. I know you're right, Lucius Malfoy will no doubt use your disownment to enact several Pureblood laws and sully the Potter name."

"Which, even if I'm disowned I can use, take a look at Black. His mother burned him off the tapestry in their ancestral home and he can't access the family vaults but he's still a Black. Though of course, depending on how much of a mess the Potter name gets dragged into I probably wouldn't keep it anyway."

"What surname do you plan on taking?" Flitwick asked curiously, his image in the flames flickering.

"Does it matter?" Harry said cynically. "Unless I chose a name carrying a lot of weight behind it from a dead pureblood line, it won't matter, it'll be branded as a muggle surname. Of course I could be contentious and chose Slytherin or something to thumb my nose at the Order and at Voldemort. That could be fun."

"Certainly. But the ramifications of such an act would be hard to live with."

Harry stared at the concerned face of his old Head of House. "The fall out would indeed be terrible. Can you imagine Malfoy senior inviting me to the manor? Dark families everywhere would either be inviting me over to see for themselves the upstart who dared to claim such a name or to kill me on Voldemort's orders."

"Not to mention Albus."

Harry waved away Flitwick's warning, as he shifted on his knees to relieve the growing stiffness in them. "Dumbledore can't see past the end of his nose and for being such a great wizard is surprisingly closed minded. He still insists Daniel is the Boy-Who-Lived despite the ample amount of suggestions and information to the contrary. He believes, I think, too much in his own image to ever admit he might be wrong. He's tried but it's like his brain goes out to lunch and he's back to his normal behavior with me."

"That doesn't sound like Albus," Flitwick frowned. "Though nothing seems to sound like Albus these days. He's been off for a while."

Harry thought for a moment. "You don't suppose he's been..." he trailed off.

"No. I'm certain he hasn't," Flitwick said, negating Harry's suspicion.

"Even the strongest willed of people can succumb to an enticing enough situation," Harry retorted, his knees creaking as he once again shifted his weight.

"Enough about him. How are you doing? You look scratched up--did aha... my wards attack you?" he asked, faintly alarmed.

Harry touched his cheek and felt the jagged edge of a scrape. He hadn't noticed it last night. "Tripped," he offered, which while true was not the cause for the scratch.

"Hmm," Flitwick said, his reservation evident in a lift of a white scraggly brow.

“Could I--” Harry started, running a hand through his hair unconsciously. “Perhaps add a ward or two of my own on the house?”

Interest sparked in the half-goblin’s eyes. “What kind were you thinking of?”

“Fidelius,” he mumbled, but Flitwick heard him.

“It, aha... won’t work.”

“I could do it!”

“No, I didn’t mean that. I own the house therefore aha.. I must be in on the secret and agree to hiding the house. If you plan to live there you can’t be secret keeper anymore than I could. Who else would do it for us that we could trust not to let the secret out?”

Harry’s bristling anger fell away instantly. “Damn.”

“Yes,” Flitwick corroborated.

Harry sat there thinking, chewing on his lip for a few minutes when suddenly he straightened, eyes sparking. “What if--” he started tantalizingly, “What if I could do something similar to the Fidelius Charm that could let us get around that particular hitch?”

Flitwick shook his head in the flames, sneezing when ashes blew up on his end. “I’m afraid it just isn’t possible. There’s no such charm, Harry.”

“But if--”

“Harry,” Flitwick returned, disapprovingly. “The very nature of the Fidelius Charm is an act of love and trust. You can’t bypass it. Not in any way. Someone has to love you enough to cast it and you have to trust them to hold you more dear than themselves.”

“But Peter betrayed my parents...”

“Thus the Charm failed as it is meant to do. He valued himself over all else. He was a rat.”

Harry ducked his head and glared at the floor. “He sure was.”

“Now, I don’t have the stamina of youth. My knees are creaking and I have classes to prepare for. I shall contact you later. There’s food in the ice box and pantry.”

“Goodbye, Professor.”

Flitwick’s head disappeared in a flare of green that died into a regular orange fire. Harry groaned softly as he got to his feet, knees popping all the way. He massaged a kneecap and shuffle walked into the small kitchen. Stretching his leg again, he received a satisfying crack and felt better for it.

Harry scratched at his chin, covering a yawn with the same hand as he opened the ice box and checked its contents. He was disappointed in not being able to perform the secret-keeping ward on the house. Without Flitwick’s approval wizarding law and magic from the first council of the magical Witenagemot, later renamed as Wizengamot, prevented Harry from ‘stealing’ another’s property by means of subjugation in warding, spell work, or rituals.

Rumor had it Merlin did the original wording of the verbose documents that were held in high security in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement for basic rights. He had poured magic into the words and when the fifty ruling wizard clans had signed it, marked themselves and those under them subject to being held to the letter of the law. Literally.

He pulled out a chilled vat of pumpkin juice, deftly canceling the preserving charm placed on it to keep it from spoiling. He took a swig from the container and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Placing the jug on the counter he dug a little further into the ice box and pulled out a cold beef sandwich.

Hedwig flew to the counter, landing with a light click of her talons. Harry tore off a piece of his sandwich and held it under her beak. She raised her head out of the way, rebuffing his overture. Harry shrugged

and popped it into his mouth. Hedwig looked nonplussed by this and hooted indignantly, shuffling her wings in agitation.

He suppose he was meant to be tripping all over himself to beg her forgiveness. Not doing so was an unforgivable act, but Hedwig couldn't rule over him forever. He hadn't outgrown her, he would always need her, but she would have to learn he didn't answer to her anymore.

Just before he polished off the last bit of the beef sandwich he offered it to her once more. "Come on," he cajoled. "I know you're hungry. You can't be that mad at me."

Hooting loudly, Hedwig told him differently as she snatched the last morsel and gobbled it down.

"There," Harry said smugly. "Much better."

Hedwig trilled shrilly causing him to wince. He left the kitchen carrying the jug of pumpkin juice back into the common room. Shoving Oorjit aside he plopped down, sinking into the couch. He sighed happily and nursed his juice while Oorjit groused wiggled very little as his distended belly was jostled.

§Give it up,§ Harry teased, poking the lump formally known as Nagini. §I know you're a right smug bastard at the moment. You just ate the most feared snake in all of Britain.§

§She is given me indigestion,§ Oorjit hissed, blinking open one eye to study him beadily.

§Well she would,§ Harry returned, sipping lightly. §She was a frenzied psycho-snake. When have you ever heard those as being a rare and delicious delicacy?§

Oorjit grumbled something hard to hear, but Harry heard it and laughed.

When Harry stopped laughing he straightened up and set the vat of pumpkin juice aside. §Now, we have things to decide.§

§I'm digesting.§

§You can still be a contributing factor,§ Harry said, overriding Oorjit's feeble complaint.

§Fine,§ the occamy stated sullenly.

Harry ran a hand through his hair before stopping halfway and removing it. He stared at it in disgust and dropped it to the couch. §As I see it we have a few options. We can go on the lam, take my money out of Gringotts and go hole up somewhere, we could stay put and do nothing, or we could go to Germany and find Godric's garter.§

§I vote for the second option,§ Oorjit said without preamble.

Harry patted the occamy on the head. §Yes, clearly that is the best option. As I see it we could do the first one and be all right. Wait out the war and hope Daniel kills the Dark Lord. Since that is as likely to happen as a muggle aeroplane landing right on top of the bastard, I feel our only course of action is to do the third.§

§What? Why!§

§Isn't it obvious?§ Harry replied, scratching his chin again, rubbing the growing shadow. §Voldemort will try to find us and kill us for what we did--you eating Nagini and I stabbing him in the back. Hiding has the possibly of working in our favor if I can wrangle permission from Flitwick to attempt a snake language spell over the house or buy a plot of land and do the same thing there.§

§Go on...§ Oorjit coaxed when Harry paused thinking.

§Well. I think this garter of Godric's is probably a Horcrux. Why on earth is it a garter I don't know. The picture just doesn't gel, but we have clues and I know Voldemort. He won't hide it someplace inconspicuous, not with the items he laid a bold claim to by using them as his horcruxes. Their heritage is universal throughout Britain, believed lost or forgotten or a myth in relation to the founders of Hogwarts. We would just have to run around the famous wizarding sights of Germany until we stumbled upon it.§

Oorjit hissed disapprovingly. §Oh great plan, running around a country looking for a single mouse hole. Makes perfect sense really.§

Harry stood up off the couch and paced back and forth in front of the fireplace. Oorjit's head swayed back and forth watching his progress. Harry rubbed the back of his neck in frustration and whipped around.

§Why don't you come up with ideas instead of just shooting mine down!§

§I haven't said no to all your propositions, only the one,§ Oorjit recalled, flicking his tongue out to lick his nose.

§We've gotten rid of four of his Horcruxes. There's only two left and then the Dark Lord's mortal. It wouldn't matter if he caught up with us then.§

§You're more likely to get caught trying to find them then if you just stayed put. He must have spies everywhere.§

Harry glared at the occamy and flicked his hand, flipping Oorjit off the couch. Oorjit hissed warningly, flapping roughly to get back up to the cushion where he'd been resting.

§Do that again and you can go alone,§ Oorjit declared, curling up, protecting his belly.

Hedwig landed on Harry's shoulder and hooted sharply at the lazing snake. He blinked open an eye and huffed. She called out again and Oorjit shook his head in disgust.

§Fine, damn it, tell your stupid pigeon to shut up. We'll go hunting down the bloody garter.§

Harry petted his suddenly docile owl, stroking her feathers when she hopped down to his outstretched forearm.

§Good. We'll still need to run to Diagon Alley for supplies and money. Drop into Flourish and Blotts or Wizzhard Books long enough to secure a tourist guidebook; and possibly some transportation.§

§Joy,§ Oorjit rhapsodized, his voice surly.

Harry laughed at Oorjit's sarcasm and crossed the room to his trunk. Hunkering down he lifted the lid and plucked out one of his new outfits before striding over to the bathroom.

§I'm going to figure out how that miniscule shower works, then we're going to make a little trip I think.§

Oorjit tucked his head under a fat coil and declared, §I'm going to nap.§

§Enjoy it, it's going to be your last for a while,§ Harry called over his shoulder before slipping into the bathroom, all the while humming to himself.

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 37°«««°»»»°

Chapter 38

(not beta-ed)

Harry sat on a conjured stool in the kitchen, eating a bowl of thick hearty stew and nursing a chilled Butterbeer that he had bought from Tom in the Leaky Cauldron on his way out of Diagon Alley. His packages from the excursion laid strewn about the common room. He had everything from four books to a portable tent. His coffers might have been nearly depleted in the effort of being prepared, but luckily money from the sapphire Verbenas was cutting and resetting into exquisite pieces was still rolling in leaving him with little financial worries.

He fed Hedwig a piece of thick bread, scratching her affectionately on the head while she hooted in thanks. Oorjit he could see was curled up on the hearth in the other room soaking up the heat from the fire. Harry took a mouthful of stew and considered what he was going to do.

First he would have to organize the four compartment trunk with the camping gear, supplies, and food reserves. One compartment would have to be charmed to stay cool so the food wouldn't go bad overnight and another would have to be spelled to be unshakeable so that potions and explosive ingredients wouldn't jostle. The final two compartments were going to house his wardrobe and personal items, and the rest of the useful if mismatched equipment.

What cost the most for his Horcrux search was a very expensive woven demiguise invisibility cloak. It wasn't perfect invisibility, but it was the closest thing a wizard could get to, closer still if the wearer first hit himself with a disillusionment charm. The second was his tailored graphorn hide battle armor from Knockturn Alley's *Dragonhorn & More*.

Graphorn hide was at least twice as resilient as dragon hide, thus being more expensive as it was harder to catch and tan. While his purchase wasn't a complete set of body armor, it would do well enough with its vest, arm, and leg pieces. He had to settle for dragon hide boots because the molded graphorn boots were pricier than even the armor.

He had to admit, his precautions might be exceedingly extravagant and in many cases overabundant, but with Voldemort after him there really wasn't a price he'd put on his safety. Finishing the last of the stew, Harry grabbed the Butterbeer and ambled out into the common room, surveying the mess. There was a lot of work to do before he could consider leaving.

A glance at Oorjit confirmed it. They wouldn't be leaving until the noticeable bulge in the occamy's body was diminished. Harry wasn't about to put up with a extremely grumpy snake. Oorjit tended to get mouthy.

A cool vibrating sensation from his robes alerted Harry to an incoming call. He scrambled to pull out the mirror and held it aloft. The buzzing stopped and a bright warm honey eye appeared. Harry smiled amused at her antics. Hermione pulled back from the mirror a moment later and he could see her whole face.

"Hello Harry," she said breathlessly.

"Hermione," he intoned softly, drinking in her features. "What can I do you for?"

"Did you get the Prophet today?" she asked excitedly.

Harry shook his head. "No, I don't bother with the tripe that rag dishes out."

"You should definitely get a copy, Harry," Hermione replied, imbuing her words with a sense of mystery.

Harry scratched his cheek. "Why don't you tell me what's in it so I don't have to go hunt down a copy?"

"Well," she said, her voice full of intrigue. "The outcome of the duel for one, Daniel's full confession for another, and an entire editorial about you being the real Boy-Who-Lived."

"What?" Harry exclaimed, groping for a seat and ended up flopping heavily to the floor. "You mean to tell me Daniel told the truth?"

“When you won, the oath Daniel took to fight you compelled him to speak.”

Harry shook his head, raising a shaky hand to trace his scar. “Who wrote the article?”

“Rita Skeeter and Barnabas Cuffe. Skeeter told readers that Dumbledore was going to hush up Daniel’s confession, which he gave in the Headmaster’s office. She went on and on about how Daniel was a disreputable scoundrel of the worse sort to do that to his own brother and to wizarding Britain, leading them on and such.”

“He told the truth?” Harry repeated, grappling with the image of his brother actually doing such a thing. “I didn’t think he knew how.”

“Ron is quite put off by the whole thing,” Hermione said knowingly. She leaned closer to the mirror and whispered, “When his brothers and Ginny got a hold of him afterward I hear there was quite a row. Ron’s face was said to get redder than his hair when they told him what Daniel had said about Ginny and how he blamed the twins for everything.”

“I can imagine,” Harry said, giving a weak chuckle and he forced himself to sit up against the wall.

“What about--”

“Your parents?” Hermione filled in gently. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, “I don’t know. Your Dad’s still petrified. Professor Snape is brewing the Revival Potion using the newly harvested mandrake crop. Your Mum hasn’t left the hospital wing since Daniel’s confession.”

“She won’t talk to him?”

Hermione shook her head. “I think she’s a little lost right now. You did very powerful magic Harry,” she said awed. “I didn’t even realize you could petrify somebody with a spell. I thought only basilisks had the ability to do that. The spell must be very dark indeed to do that. Where did you read about it?”

“Here or there,” he answered noncommittally with a small shrug.

“Whatever you used is like an overpowered petrificus totalus, instead of turning your Dad stiff as a board and knocking him flat you turned him completely to stone.”

“Serves the tosser right.”

Hermione glanced in askance at his dark growl but went on informing him of everything that had been happening in his absence. “Students were scared at first, talking about you being dark and starting wild rumors that you’d joined Voldemort right after you left Hogwarts to be his apprentice. But when Dumbledore couldn’t stop Rita from writing that article, and after everybody read the truth, people all over the school in different houses started to take your side. Half of Gryffindor is against your brother now.”

“I bet losing his fan club is killing Daniel. He thrived on attention.”

“He’s getting loads of it now, just not the kind of attention he is used to or wants.”

Harry leaned forward, asking intently, “What’s Dumbledore doing to control the situation now that the truth’s leaked?”

“The Board of Governors are currently in a meeting with Dumbledore discussing your expulsion. I think Mr. Malfoy is petitioning in your favor which is leaving Draco paler than he usually is and you know how difficult that’d be for him to do.”

Harry snorted. “I can’t believe Malfoy is championing me.” He paused, laughed and shook his head. “No, actually I can. I was just telling Flitwick about it. Lucius Malfoy must be rubbing his hands together and cackling like a moron in the board meeting. He’s just been handed everything he could want on a silver platter.”

Hermione nodded, looking a trifle worried. “Like I said before, the whole school is talking about you, good or bad, but mostly good. Several of the younger Ravenclaws have come forward in support of you. Even Padma came to apologize to me for how she acted about us dating, said she was wrong about you.”

"She's only half-exonerated," Harry replied. "She hasn't apologized to me and frankly, I'm not sure if I would care if she did. Padma's only doing it to clear her own guilty conscious."

"I haven't spoken with Su. I was hoping she would come when Padma did. We haven't been friends since right after the Horcrux got a hold of me," Hermione said softly, looking away from the mirror. "I haven't really been close to either of them since I started seeing you."

"I'm sorry," he said, feeling helpless, wishing he could hold her.

She turned back to him, her eyes glistening a little. "I'm sorry," she whispered, a soft hitch in her voice. "I have to go."

"Thank you," Harry told her equally softly, wishing his could touch her, give her comfort. "Take care."

"Bye, Harry."

The mirror went blank and Harry stared at it expressionlessly for a minute or two before shoving it back in his pocket. His mind was churning as he raced back to his challenge of Daniel right after Charms. Had Luna really known if he'd waited that he would win the duel and Daniel would expose himself to Britain and the world at large as a fraud? It seemed too incredible to believe.

The girl was in her own words a natural at Divination, but he had always thought predictions were on grander scales than what she sometimes yammered on about. Who could believe in plover to Horcrux ratios, besides Luna? Then to draw from it accurate information! Simply incredible.

Harry had never before appreciated the art of Divination, like Hermione thinking it a waste of time, a mindless diversion requiring little work and a vivid imagination. Right now though, he was currently entertaining very warm and woolly feelings toward the subject. With Luna behind the crystal ball, predicting the future was entirely plausible and dare he think it, sensible.

He surveyed the common room as he reflecting on Luna's contribution to Daniel's fall from grace and his subsequent rise into it.

He supposed owls would be tracking him trying to deliver apologies from shamefaced parties. If he didn't want to draw unwanted attention to himself while he was traveling he would have to put up an owl disrupter ward on himself and set up an interception drop-box where the owls could unload their baggage.

"Hedwig!" he called to the snowy owl still perched in the kitchen.

She flew to him and landed deftly on his shoulder. Harry stroked her satiny white feathers and clucked softly to her. Hedwig hooted contentedly back to him.

"Girl, I'm going to place a ward around myself. Don't panic when you can't sense me even while you're looking right at me. When I get it in place I'll throw in the exceptions to allow you to get through the disrupters."

Hedwig hooted in understanding and took flight, squeezing her talons a little harder than usual on take off as a supportive gesture. Harry looked at her gratefully and went to locate his wand. He found it inside a bag from Thaumaturge, the apothecary shop where he had garnered several of the potions and ingredients for his trip.

Gripping the wand in his right hand tightly, Harry cleared a space of five square feet with a silent spell, following it up with a large chalk triangle drawing on the floor. Standing at the epicenter of the triangle he pointed his wand at the first point and whispered a complex string of Latin that basically meant, "Hide me from those who wish to seek me. Distort my magical signature so they can not find me. Protect me by confusing those who look for me. Divert the messengers to Filius Flickwick's residence."

He said this to the other two points and when he was finished the points glowed bright white and flashed hotly behind his closed eyelids. A breeze drifted across his face and he opened his eyes. Hedwig stared at him, her yellow eyes filled with worry. He smiled and closed his eyes again adding the final phrase to his Latin to exclude Hedwig from the personal ward.

A softer light flared and when he was done and had erased the chalk boundaries, Hedwig landed on his shoulders with a grip that indicated

she was still experiencing leftover anxiety from the few moments when she couldn't sense him. Harry had no doubt that had he not included her in a bypass she would have broken through it to find him, it just would have taken her time.

"Now that that's taken care of," he murmured walking back toward the kitchens. "I'm feeling rather famished. Shall we eat, then take a nap?"

Hedwig hooted in approval and nipped his ear affectionately.

--

The owl ward was working and so was the drop box. Harry was walking inside with a bundles of written on parchment, several scrolls, and a myriad of letters. He remembered the earlier complications that had plagued his newfound system several days earlier.

At first owls circled around the house, looking lost and confused because it was at the same time both the place where he lived and where the drop box was located. That meant that the disrupter ward was blocking his signal and attempting to send the birds to his drop off box where of course they already were, becoming a loop of mixed signals for the owls. Harry easily remedied the problematic situation by making a copse of trees just outside the Professor's house be his drop-off, where he was heading in from.

§More of your adoring fanmail?§ Oorjit scoffed, tilting his head backwards over the couch to view Harry upside down as he came inside.

§Some from Daniel's more persistent fans as well,§ Harry said, raising a hand that was covered in deep purple rash.

§People still believe that little miscreant is the real Boy-Who-Lived?§

§Seems so,§ Harry replied, dropping the letters on the table near Oorjit and walking to his trunk.

He opened the third compartment and scanned the organized shelves for a Rash-Be-Gone potion. He had bought five with the idea

of running into poisonous plants, but in the case of crazy bastards it was also good to have on hand.

He found the little green bottles behind an ornate flask of Re'em blood, extremely rare, as the ox-like animal is found in North America. Current trade regulations and embargos placed by the Americans on the Re'ems protected the species whose numbers were hunted down to nearly extinction alongside the buffalo. Re'ems were still listed today as an endangered species which made the flask expensive but worth it.

Harry closed the trunk and with his uninjured hand popped the stopper out and drank straight from the bottle. His hand started tingling and by the time he drained the potion his hand was tinged redder than normal but was otherwise fine. Watching his hand, Harry spread his fingers far apart and felt the skin stretch tight. Closing his hand into a fist, he felt a lingering sense of agitation.

Oorjit uncurled lazily, flicking his tongue out on a soft hiss. §Was it just one letter?§

§No,§ Harry replied, vanishing the bottle with a negligent flick of his hand. §There were several howlers that I had to dispose of. Only the one letter slipped by my initial screening.§

Oorjit scowled at the pile. §Cowardly mouse-droppings, the lot of them.§

§Yes, well, in a few hours we'll be far away from here and the letters.§

§Must we be?§ Oorjit immediately whined.

Harry shook his head at the occamy and visually double checked everything was packed and ready to go. §We already delayed our start by several days because of your belly-aching.§

§The bitch is tough on the digestion.§

§Spare me the histrionics,§ Harry mumbled, rolling his eyes.

He searched the room for Hedwig and found her sitting on top of the mantle.

“He’s doing it again,” he said ominously to Hedwig, wagging his eyebrows.

She hooted back in commiseration and tucked her head beneath a curled wing to block out the continued hissing. Following her lead, Harry disregarded the moaning snake and started shrinking everything in sight. The trunk first, next the tent and camping gear, followed by the broom case, and lastly Hedwig’s cage. He gathered everything into a small shopping bag and after placing a Lose-Not charm on the bag, tucked it into his pockets.

Harry quickly did a run through the house and concluded that everything was indeed packed up, nodded meaningfully to Hedwig and immobilized Oorjit. He was so much easier to handle when he was shut up.

Hedwig landed on his shoulder hooting smugly down at the frozen occamy in Harry’s hand. Oorjit’s glower if possible grew darker, promising revenge. Ignoring the two of them, Harry grabbed the old smoking pipe he made into a Portkey, it wasn’t due to activate for another ten minutes, and walked outside.

Wind rustled through the copse of trees, filling the air with a crinkling sound. Harry shifted Oorjit to his other hand as Hedwig cooed softly, fluttering her feathers. A prickling sensation caused the hairs on the back of his neck to stand. Harry gave an uneasy glance over his shoulder before drawing his wand and locking Flitwick’s home with a strong set of anti-theft and anti-entering locks.

He was of course worrying about nothing. Flitwick’s wards were top notch. Surely nobody could have found him and taken down the wards without so much as setting off the multiple alarms weaved through the layers. Still the uneasy feeling trickled down Harry’s spine and for good measure he added a very quick and basic alerting ward to signal to Flitwick his house was under attack if spell damage hit the side of the house.

As he finished a low tearing sound rippled the air. Harry froze, straining his ears under the darkening sky. When it didn't come, he cautiously turned around. The lengthening shadows crept across the lawn extending far beyond the line of trees. Harry thought he could detect movement and withdrew his wand simultaneously shoved the Portkey between his lips. He clamped down hard on the pipe and angled his wand toward the copse.

A line of black robes emerged from the tree line giving Harry pause. This did not look good, he thought fighting down panic. There was always time to panic later, he had to focus *now*. Harry edged away from the front door, holding his breath, tense and alert.

Green light sluiced through the air, heralding the start of the attack. This time without a trunk to trip him up, Harry dodged smoothly and let the spell hit the house. He was grimly aware of the fact that Flitwick was being warned of the imminent trouble, but would not possibly arrive before either his Portkey went off or he was dead. Perhaps both.

Hedwig took flight when another singular spell nearly hit her. He was grateful, this way he wouldn't be worrying about her. Harry crouched and held himself steady, holding the frozen form of Oorjit in one hand and his wand in the other. Then the attack really began.

With spells being launched at him from some many directions it was all Harry could do to conjure the myriad of shields to block the attacks. Stone to stop a killing curse. It shattered over his crouching form. Wood to stop weak physical spells aimed to weaken him, so no sense in wasting energy conjuring something catch all there. A regular first year protego to prevent getting slammed with an *impedimenta*. A block of ice barely stopped a fire lasso aimed at him. The whip cracked straight through the ice, leaving it smoking. A silver metal shield stopped a slicing hex resulting in a long low gong.

"Damn," he cursed when a particularly nasty hex sliced right through his shield and caught him on the arm.

The arm started swelling immediately, turning a mottled purple and black leaving Harry in doubt he'd lose the arm if he didn't counter it quickly. Hugging the wounded arm close to his body Harry started to

throw back spells instead of relying on defense only. He had no hope of pushing them back, if he could stall, perhaps he'd make it alive to the Portkey activation.

How much time was left?

Harry didn't know and couldn't waste time pondering it. There was too much else happening to spare a thought off the battle. A angry yellow curse raised the hair on his neck as it slid just over the top of his head. The Death Eater's aim had been off. Harry threw back his own curse and nailed the Death Eater.

Elation twisted in his gut. That was one down. His arm throbbed reminding him he had to find time to counter it.

Three blasting spells hurtled at him from three directions and Harry had to drop to the ground. No shield fully covered the body, he knew. Had he tried to keep his shield in place he would have been hit, and most likely, down for the count.

Quickly he rolled away from his spot and just in time too as the same three Death Eaters worked in quick succession to toss another series of curses at where he'd been. They impacted the ground, shooting dirt into the air. It rained down on Harry, who made sure he kept the Portkey in his mouth as he rolled backwards and back onto his feet.

He was a ninja. He was stealth. He was in deep shit.

A new figure emerged from the tree line and Harry knew from his scar flaring to life that it was Voldemort. Did he never get a break? Cursing his luck he gripped his wand firmly and tucked Oorjit away with a wandless banisher. There was no way he could fight the Death Eaters and Voldemort at the same time.

Harry scuttled along the wall of the house, hoping he could escape around the backside. Ground erupted inches from where he ran, throwing him backwards from the sheer force of the explosion. Harry landed hard on his back, breaking the fall with his head. Pain pounded in his skull, falling like physical blows.

Another curse hit him causing him to vomit. His arm throbbed agonizingly, and he threw up again. Harry aimed his wand at his arm and managed to mumble the counter curse to fix his arm. It squelched and stretched and compressed until it felt like his skin had severed itself from his arm, but it was usable again.

“HARRY!”

He heard his name being called out, but another wave of nausea kept him from looking for its source. Voldemort hit him with a cruciatus next and the person’s shout was the farthest thing from his mind.

Harry lay there on the ground twisting and curling, contorting himself desperately. Unimaginable pain devastated him, leaving him screaming on the ground. It was unending, nothing could stop it. Everything hurt. The touch of cloth on his skin killed him and it was rubbing, rubbing, rubbing. He got sick again and chocked on it. Harry tried to think of something, anything but the pain but it was commanding, mastering him and through it all he heard a shrieking laugh that made his ears bleed.

“HARRY!”

Suddenly the pain was gone, the laughing stopped. Groaning in protest, Harry forced his every aching muscle to push and pull himself up off the ground. He was limp, drained, utterly spent. He felt like he had nothing left to give.

Shades of pain slithered along his body like phantoms, ghosts just waiting to be resurrected. He stifled a whimper as he clutched his wand groping frantically for the Portkey. It had slipped from his mouth when he had cried out under the curse.

Wet bloody grass coated his fingers in red. His hands got dirty as he scraped them against tiny loose pebbles, searching. There to the left of him, he found it and Oorjit, who he had discarded also. Clutching them tightly, he brought his arms back close to his body and with great effort forced himself to stand upright.

He would not be seen cowering on the ground. Not if he could help it. He squared his shoulders and glanced across the field at Voldemort

finding to his surprise, his tiny professor dueling like a madman with the Dark Lord, dodging spells tossed at him by the circling Death Eaters with such grace and ease, it was like watching a choreographed dance.

Just then the Portkey activated as he heard Voldemort shriek, “Avada Kedavra!”

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 38°«««°»»»°

Chapter 39

Harry careened headlong into safety, just barely managing to keep himself upright. Wizard-style travel was such a pain in the arse. If one wasn't getting crushed through a black hose, splinched in half, tumbling headlong out of fireplaces covered in grime, smacking into windows and lurching sickeningly around corners, you were falling headfirst after being tossed about in a whirligig of compressed space.

He let go of Oorjit and took off the petrifying hex, freeing the poor occamy of the immobilization effects. It was then he realized he didn't have Hedwig with him and he groaned covering his face with his hands.

§She'll kill me,§ he said behind his hands.

§Perhaps, however, you have slightly more pressing matters.§ Oorjit said dryly, flapping his wings irritably as he stretched and curled his slender body working out its kinks.

Harry nodded. §Flitwick is in danger, possibly dead.§

§Voldemort will trace the portkey distortion signature.§

§Right,§ Harry agreed, holding out his arm for Oorjit to land on.
§Obviously we must be heading out then.§

The occamy perched heavily on the arm, reminding Harry of the dull heavy ache of the curse he'd been hit with earlier. Oorjit curled his tail tightly around his arm, causing the ache to throb warningly. He just barely managed to withhold from wincing. The blasted snake was doing it on purpose.

§Quit it,§ Harry warned.

§Or what?§ Oorjit said with studied indifference. §You'll immobilize me again?§

Harry dropped the argument and, with a thought, locked on Oorjit's presence and shifted their masses to one hundred kilometers south of Nuremberg, a small dot on the traveler's map, with easily

memorable coordinates; from there he Apparated them to the smaller wizarding village of Zauberin, founded seven hundred years ago by the Zweig family. The town was famous for its local brewery which produced many fine selections but was most known for its ale.

Materializing in the middle of town, his appearance evoked several stares and shocked a few more, who stared at him and Oorjit like they'd grown two heads. Realizing how disheveled and wounded he looked, Harry cast a quick glamour and hoped for the best. His knee twinged in pain as he started walking around the small crowd of shoppers and villagers to the inn on the other side of the square.

Oorjit drifted in the air above him and with a parting hiss indicated he was going to go hunting in the meadow to the north. Harry glanced down the wide main street with an unheeded view of the snowy meadow and waved a hand at the departing occamy.

He entered the well lit and cozy little inn, basking in the sudden warmth that seeped into his limbs. Harry drifted over to the innkeeper behind the counter, his gaze alighting on every gleaming surface. The whole place cheered him. It was nothing like the Three Broomsticks or the Warty Inn of Hogsmeade.

The beaming innkeeper had a jovial round face and greeted him in German. Harry quickly cast the translating spell Luna had given him upon his expulsion and returned a hesitant hello.

"Good, you speak German," the innkeeper said. "Of course with help from a spell, but no matter. The mother language is a beautiful one and with extensive use of the charm, you should no doubt start to understand segments of our speech and before long you'll be as fluent as Ludo my son. I'm joking of course, you'll speak much better than my four-year old, at least I hope."

"Er... thanks, I think."

"How can I help you?" said the man, opening a ledger and pulling out an abacus which seemed to move and calculate on its own when left to its own devices.

"I need to make an international fire call. It's an emergency."

The innkeeper's eyebrows raised. "What is wrong?"

"I must speak with my uncle," Harry fibbed. "He sent me away from a fight, you see, to protect me. I have to make sure he's okay."

"Can you not jump to him?"

Harry shook his head vehemently. "No, the wards stop me, so Floo?"

"This way, there's a small converted broom cupboard with a chair. Not much, but you'll have more privacy and a longer time without incoming interruption from travelers and guests."

"Thank you," Harry said, following the man to the small niche. "How much do I owe you?"

"If your uncle is fine, then you and I will discuss. Otherwise, my sincerest condolences. I've heard about those men in the black robes with white faces. The Dead Eats?"

"Death Eaters."

"Yes, the Death Eaters. Terrible business. Been a few unsettling occurrences over here, disappearances and the like. The papers say it's nothing to worry about."

"It started as disappearances in Britain too."

"I see," the innkeeper said, looking unsettled. "I think when you are done I will call my Becky and tell her to come back from that confectionary conference she's at. Becky is English like you. She and I married the summer of her second European Tour."

The innkeeper's worried frown was the last thing Harry saw before the door was shut and he was alone in the claustrophobic room. The heat from the fire was unbearably hot, and Harry cast a cooling charm on his feverish skin before grabbing a handful of the international purple Floo powder and throwing it into the fire. The flames flared, flashing a bright purple before calming and dancing merrily in the hearth.

"Flitwick Cottage."

"Password?" came a warm monotone voice.

"The firebird's flame is searing in knowledge that is neither good nor evil and simply is."

The image in the flames coalesced into an image of Flitwick's common room. At first it appeared empty and Harry was disappointed until he caught movement from the direction of the kitchens.

"Professor!" he called out.

The tiny head of his diminutive ex-Head of House jerked upright. A wand appeared in his hand as if it had always been there, mystifying Harry, before he locked gazes with Flitwick.

"It's good to see you all right."

"Who are you?" Flitwick snarled, leveling the wand at Harry's flaming head.

"Harry Potter, sir," Harry stated confused.

"Harry doesn't know German."

Enlightenment dawned and Harry quickly thought of the cancellation of the charm, letting it drop. "Sorry professor, it really is me. I'm glad to see you're all right."

"What did Luna find in my hat the day you were expelled?"

"A er.. bootplunky? Plinky? A hamster-thing."

Flitwick lowered his wand and tucked it in his sleeve. "That killing curse almost hit you. I was afraid it had when you disappeared. I am glad you fire called. Where are you in Germany?"

"Zauberin."

"Aha... I know a friend there. A Mrs. Amsel, she runs a bakery. Makes the most delicious blackbird pie. The birds of course are

unharmd and fly delightfully away after cutting through the crust. Be sure you give her a visit and say hello for me now."

"Yes, sir."

"Now Harry, why are you in Germany?"

"Looking for something."

Flitwick leveled him with a shrewd look humming noncommittally under his breath. "Sure thing, Harry. Might I ask however how you intended to continue your studies whilst on this search of yours?"

Harry ducked his head sheepishly. "I had thought to pop in on the weekends in Hogsmeade like we had planned."

"And had this little disturbance not occurred, would you aha... have told me you were out of the country?"

Harry grinned slightly. "Guilty as charged. Sir, how did you escape Voldemort?"

"I activated some of my more interesting wards and drove them off. Apparently Voldemort wasn't aiming to attack my home so much as he was trying to get to you. Do you have any idea why is he after you?"

"I'm related to Daniel. Isn't that enough?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps, he went after you because Daniel's been exposed as a fraud. That leaves me with yet one more thing to apologize to you for. Might I ask you aha... an indelicate question?"

Harry shrugged.

"Was it you and your deeds Daniel always described so effusively as his own?"

"Yes."

Flitwick's expression saddened, a trace of pity lingering in his bright blue eyes before being pushed aside with a look of determination.

"We'll start training the day after tomorrow. Twice a week, inside the Shrieking Shack. No excuses, not even this European Tour business you have going on will stop our meetings. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Get some medical attention and some rest."

"Thank you," Harry said quietly, retreating out of the flames.

"It is I who should be thanking you," Flitwick countered, "for giving me the chance to right some wrongs."

The image of Flitwick's home dispersed in a shower of sparks and the flames returned to their normal color. Harry rubbed his tired eyes and thought about how angry Hedwig would be when they met again the day after tomorrow. That was twice he'd left her behind in nearly as many days. In fact, angry was too dull a word; Hedwig would be livid and riled up enough to give him a few scars from her sharp talons by way of retribution.

Harry opened the door and stepped out of the tiny space, closing it behind him with a soft click. He made his way back to the innkeeper who watched him come over with concern. Harry offered up a tired smile and recast the translating charm on himself.

"How is your uncle?"

"My uncle is well. Apparently they had been thwarted by some very potent and latent wards my uncle had ready to spring on them. He's nothing if not thinking ahead two paces when it comes to dueling," Harry paused, "Of course he's starting to sound more and more like Alastor Moody--"

"The crazy Auror? Yes, yes, I've heard of him. Quite the character."

"You said I would owe something if news was good?" Harry asked taking a small pouch of money out of his pockets. "I'm afraid all I have right now is a couple of galleons, a few sickles, and a handful of knuts."

"First time out of the country?" the man asked bemused.

Harry looked up from the pile of coins in his hand. "It is."

"Goblin money is the same everywhere. Why do you think the galleon is so high in conversion rates with muggle money? Very rarely does local economics play on it's value. The call will be 12 knuts."

Harry counted them out and handed them to the man. "Do you have any rooms available to rent?"

"Yes, yes. Plenty of rooms. I will set you up then go fire call my Becky."

A few more coins were exchanged and Harry was escorted to a spacious private corner room with it's own fireplace and bath.

"There's no connection to the Floo," the innkeeper said beside the door and Harry nodded, waving the man off to go call his wife.

The door shut tightly leaving Harry alone and he indulged himself with a loud groan and flopped heavily onto the bed. He ached now all over and could barely wrap his mind around the idea that he was in another country searching for pieces of the Dark Maggot's soul. He groaned again, forcing himself to sit up and take the trunk out of his pants.

He enlarged it and placed it at the foot of the bed. When it was full size he opened the second compartment grabbing several toiletries and carrying them into the small bath adjoining his room. He took a shower, scrubbing off leftover goo, vomit, and blood, and then he took some time to relax under the spray of the warm water; he stood there mindlessly letting the water pound down around him.

After a while though he turned the spray off and got out, drying himself on a soft fluffy white towel. He shaved quickly and finished up with his ablutions, not bothering with the comb he'd packed. His hair was sticking up all over the place, but previous battles with it had taught him not to care so much.

He eyed his appearance in the mirror, focusing on the red stripe in his hair and shaking his head at his life. It would seem he had his validation, his word was weighted against his brother and found true. All his brother's lies had surfaced and the joy he should have felt was not present. He wasn't even slightly smug. All right, perhaps he was, but there was a hollowness to the victory.

His father hated him, planned to burn him off the family tapestry and cut him off from the Potter line as soon as he woke from his petrified state. His mother was oblivious, focusing all her attention on James. He doubted she had even tried to wrap her mind around the sudden switch in her sons, with Daniel now being reviled and Harry being glorified. Hermione was more elated than he was by this turn of events and Luna was lost to the workings of the universe, interpreting it as if it were her personal toy.

"It's not a toy, Harry," she singsonged from the other room.

Harry jerked out of his thoughts, canceling the translator spell once more, and padded quickly into the bedroom, sifting through his pants pocket for the mirror. "Luna?" he questioned, staring down at her pink face.

"Oh my," Luna chirped, blushing, "I never realized you were so built. You sure are scrumptious, like the kettlopper in daddy's backyard."

"Luna," came Hermione's voice warningly in the distance.

"Hang on a sec," Harry said as he put the mirror down on the bedspread and hurried to his trunk opening the first compartment and pulling out a pair of clean robes.

"How many robes have you ruined?" Luna asked dreamily, when he came back into view. "And how?"

"Several. Fights."

"Hero work is hazardous to one's wardrobe," she said, nodding sagely, pulling her wand from behind her ear. "Sassafrizzle."

A flash of pink light danced across the surface of the mirror.

"That's not possible!" Hermione declared hotly, sounding perturbed. Harry grinned.

"That's Luna," Harry said with a cheeky smile. "It's good to hear from you both."

Luna waved away his words. "I needed to make sure you were all right."

Touched, Harry's gaze softened. "Worried about me?"

She nodded eagerly. "My leftover bread crumbs at dinner this evening told me you were being attacked by giant fooluzzelers. I wasn't sure what a fooluzzeler was, but it can't be good."

Bemused Harry shook his head. "I'm fine. Thanks for checking in."

Hermione took the mirror from Luna and with a singularly exasperated look at the blond she turned her attention to Harry. "I told her there was no such thing as a fooluzzeler, but she didn't believe me. Insisted quite a bit to use the mirror."

"Thank you," Harry said, arranging himself more comfortably against the headrest. "I appreciate your letting Luna call me."

Hermione smiled shyly. "It's not a problem Harry. I know she's your friend... and--and I think she might even be mine."

Harry could hear the questioning lilt in her voice and said, "Luna doesn't have one mean bone in her body. How could she not like you? Of course you're friends."

"Yes, well," Hermione shifted, his view of her wavered as she got more comfortable. "I thought it might be nice to check in."

"Share the latest gossip?" he guessed.

"The inquiry is pushing forward. My parents have come up with a squib attorney the few times Aurors or Ministry Officials dropped in to ask questions. They want to check and double check my story. I think

they're talking to the Weasleys too, though I'm not sure what they're saying. My story hasn't changed.

"Lucius Malfoy came once in the official capacity as a Board Member. He delivered a bag of gold for negligence on the school's part in taking action. I think the Board of Governors finding me in the right will pave the way for what the Ministry would consider an equitable end. Lucius also had a written letter of apology from Dumbledore. I think it was forced out of him."

"I doubt very much Dumbledore eats crow very easily." Harry smirked, relishing the very thought before continuing, "Lucius is in his element. Be careful and don't see him alone again. Especially if he starts asking you about us or me. I don't trust him."

"He did ask about you, Harry," Hermione said, suddenly worried. "I told him you were safe at a professor's home when he commented on you being out in the world alone without anyone to lean on."

Harry groaned. "I was attacked at Flitwick's home tonight. Hermione."

She gasped, her eyes going bright and watery. "I'm so sorry Harry. I didn't--I mean I should of realized--I can't believe I was so stupid--"

"It's okay, honestly, happens to the best of us. Don't cry Hermione," Harry replied, her worry and tears causing his stomach muscles to cinch tight. "Both of us are fine. I thought perhaps Flitwick had told you both about the attack and that's why Luna was insisting on calling me tonight because she somehow felt I was in danger."

Hermione wiped at her leaking eyes and sniffed loudly. "I'm such a mess. Since you've left I teeter throughout the day. I can be good one minute and bawling the next."

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "It'll be better."

"When Harry?" she asked, her luminous brown eyes boring into him. "When does it get better? I can't stop thinking about you. Us. That kiss the night you left Hogwarts. Why are you punishing me? What happened with Daniel; I wasn't myself! Stop punishing me, Harry."

"Hermione--"

"I miss you, Harry," Hermione inserted, shaking her head. "But I need to know where we stand. Where I am in your affections. Do you love me? You've never said it you know."

"Hermione, I--" Harry floundered. "I--"

"Yes, Harry," she said, suddenly eerily calm, making Harry nervous.

"I do care for you, I care a great deal, but whenever you get close I picture Daniel doing the same things I do to you and I can't do that. I can't compare myself to him anymore, not even for you, Hermione--not even for your affections."

Hermione blinked slowly, digesting his hastily spoken words. "But Harry, Daniel can't even compete with you. You outclass him on all counts, especially in those matters concerning my affections."

"But since the--the incident with Horcrux, you've compared me to him," Harry replied, firming his jaw. "I would do something and then you would point out how I do it exactly like him."

"I didn't mean to," she said, stricken.

"But you did," Harry said, unable to withhold his bitterness. "How could you not? We are after all twins. You must have compared every kiss of mine to one of his. You practically told me I was as bad as he was, Hermione!"

Hermione shook her head vehemently, "Never!"

"You did!"

"Harry, whatever it sounded like it was not what I meant. I know you're better than Daniel. You prove it every day, with every breath you take."

"Then how come--"

"I was distraught, Harry! You weren't there for me. When you were around I was still reliving everything, torturing myself with it over and over."

"Adding me into the mix too."

"No," she denied. "I always looked back and saw your face. I know being with Daniel, even for a little bit, even when it wasn't really me, killed a little bit of you. You were so hurt and you still are, but you have to move beyond it, Harry or we won't work. We can't work, not with this still between us."

"I don't know if I can."

"Get over it."

"It's not that easy," he growled.

"It is that easy!"

"Hermione," Harry said tiredly. "I'm trying. I still need time."

"I love you, Harry," she whispered. "But I can't wait for you forever."

The mirror went blank.

"Hermione," Harry said, touching the mirror. "Hermione!" he called.

When she didn't reappear even after he gave the password, he flung the mirror away and ran his fingers through his hair. She was wrong to force this conversation, wrong to deny him more time--she was wrong. Harry stared blankly down at his bare feet for a long time; rising only to open the window for Oorjit and turn off the lights. He lay awake in bed long past the dead of night, wondering if he was right.

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 39°«««°»»»°

Chapter 40

Harry was found eating breakfast silently the next morning in the bakery Flitwick had mentioned the evening before. He was tired and his eyes were gritty from not sleeping, having spent all night brooding over Hermione and to be specific how she fit into his life. He was coming to the conclusion that Hermione wasn't meant for him, that all the love in the world wasn't going to fix them.

It pained him to admit it, because deep down he still cared for her, even loved her, but there was no way he could stay with a girl who would give him ultimatums like the one she gave last night. If she couldn't wait around forever, then she was implying he wasn't worth waiting for and that rubbed Harry the wrong way. If she loved him like she claimed, then he should be worth waiting for.

He frowned into his hot chocolate, staring at the slowly shrinking foam. With his life coming apart at the seams, Harry felt cut off, adrift. He had a madman after him, one he'd escaped from twice in a week; no girlfriend, no education, and no friends. Except for Luna, he added silently, taking a sip from his chocolate. And perhaps Flitwick, who wanted to cover his education and make sure he completed it.

"More hot cocoa, dear?" Mrs. Amsel, the owner of the bakery asked him, her smile warm and motherly. "You look like your contemplating the whole world and finding it very bleak."

"Yes, please," Harry said, pushing his cup toward her. "The world feels very bleak."

She clucked, pulling a breaded chocolate confection from her apron pocket and setting it beside his cup. "In that case you'll need a Cheerful Chocolate, my assistant Becky, dreamed these little fellows up. They're quite delicious and you'll feel better."

Harry smiled appreciatively and took a bite into the Cheerful Chocolate morsel. A warmth suffused him, all the way down to his toes. Harry swallowed and his grin, much happier than before, lit his face up as he expressed his thanks to Mrs. Amsel.

"No worries, dear. You just finish your chocolate now and come find me by the register when you're through."

Harry nodded enthusiastically and bit into his chocolate, stuffing his mouth full and glorying in every fuzzy warm feeling trickling through him. He felt like nothing could get him down and not wanting to lose the feeling before he could utilize it, Harry gulped the rest of the cocoa down and went to pay for his breakfast.

Mrs. Amsel didn't look surprised at his hasty wrap up and merely smiled encouragingly at him while she collected his money, bidding him good luck as he ran out the door of her bakery.

A few moments later he was dashing through the streets back to the hotel where he spent a few minutes in his room rousing Oorjit from a nap in a patch of sunlight and grabbing all his books on Germany. Harry left the room and hotel moments later with a grumpy Oorjit flying overhead in the clouds.

Harry found himself a spot surrounded by hedges in the park he had seen earlier that morning and sat down. There was a large ornate fountain of a dragon spewing red, orange, and yellow water into a fish pond below in the center of the small secluded courtyard. Oorjit landed next to him grumpily, his tongue flicking out to tickle Harry's ear. Harry gently batted the occamy's head away and laid out the books he had brought with him.

Feeling happy and sure of himself because of the chocolate, Harry selected the tourist guide book about the region he was in. He opened it to a random page and read about the monument of Unity, or Wizards Triumph Spectacularly Over Goblins as Harry dubbed it.

The monument turned out not to be twenty miles away from Zauberin. The book provided a set of coordinates to an equivalent to a British AMAS and a way to hail public transportation if Apparition wasn't possible.

Harry was just beginning to contemplate going there when Oorjit's dry snide voice said over his shoulder, §You want to go there? Why in world would you want to do that?§

§I know the history is dark,§ Harry muttered, excitement coursing through him. §It was a time of goblin and human wars with uprisings as gory as the Wendallen Werewolf slaughters. But to Voldemort it would be a sign of wizarding dominance over other less worthy magic bearing creatures.§

§Seems like a stretch to me.§

§Not when Celestial wrote a footnote regarding her thrice great grandfather being a warlock in the fullest traditional extent in Germany around this time.§

Oorjit grunted. §Perhaps,§ he conceded. §But I rather think Voldemort wouldn't give a fig about this ancestor unless he was a High Warlock and commanding hundreds of wizards to a major victory. He only claims history that elevates his status.§

Harry's brows pulled down in a frown, the chocolate wearing off. He reread the passage on the monument and sighed. Unity didn't sound nearly as plausible as it did before.

§It's all I got to go on right now.§

§I guess that's a good a reason as any to go,§ Oorjit replied with an aggrieved expression. Clearly he did not want to go see Unity.

§Still belly aching?§ Harry hissed back irritably, the effect of the chocolate completely deserting him.

§You try eating Voldemort's familiar and see what it does to your disposition,§ Oorjit retorted, raising his head loftily in the air with a disdainful hiss.

§You're such a girl,§ Harry returned, shaking his head and rubbing the sleek crown of the occamy's head. §We should at least check it out.§

§Fine,§ Oorjit replied, taking to the air. I'll meet you there.§

Harry watched him disappear behind the clouds and stood up taking a few minutes to stretch before shrinking the travel book and placing

it into his pockets. He walked back into town and found the German version of the AMAS at the center of the main square. Spinning on his heel he Apparated to the coordinates of the Unity Monument.

Twenty miles away he came back into existence without a sound and stepped off the platform. So many forced apparitions through some of England's toughest wards had made Harry very adept at apparating. He could do it silently now without even so much as the small pop that use to accompany his comings and goings.

The first impression Harry got was big. Inappropriately enormous, glittering audaciously and offensively from on top a hill. Green and black tents ringed the bottom of the hill, offering up snacks, drinks, miniatures of the monument and of the goblins and wizards who'd battled each other. Everything about Unity and its tourist trap setup was odious.

He found himself hesitating even to take another step forward, tempted to return back to Zauberin and hide out in his room until his visit with Flitwick back on the island or Voldemort found him, whichever happened first. If Oorjit wasn't on his way, Harry would have done that, instead he found himself reluctantly moving toward the heinous statue that showed just how much gall wizards held over other magical creatures.

Merlin knows, Harry didn't like the goblins all that much, but frankly watching the moving statue of the war leaders bend down and kiss the robes of the warlocks was sickening. He could barely keep the sneer off his face as he approached a vendor and bought a small bag of roasted and sugared peanuts.

He circled around the monument and shook his head. There was a group of school children being led around by a haughty professor who was expounding on the battles, leaving Harry to think he was the History of Magic professor. Certainly he was more animated than Binns ever was, alive or dead, but the professor's prejudices were blatant.

Harry listened in for a few moments, shifting through the colorful phrases from translated German, that he didn't understand. Clearly the translating spell had some limitations.

Twenty minutes later, Harry was ready to give up on Oorjit and leave. The trip had been as pointless as the occamy had predicted. He chucked his waste in a rubbish bin and headed back toward the path to the AMAS when Oorjit flew down from the clouds and landed on his shoulder.

§What did you do--stop somewhere to groom yourself?§

§Don't be catty,§ Oorjit hissed haughtily, whacking his tail against the side of Harry's head.

Harry flinched. §Ouch! You gained a stone in weight, you pea brain.§

Oorjit hit him again. §Nobody would ever think you'd been on the receiving end of Voldemort's Cruciatus with that whine.§

§Shut it,§ Harry grumbled, rubbing the back of his head.

Oorjit looked around. §Leaping lizards, would you look at that! What is that monstrosity?§

§That,§ Harry said grimly, sparing a look back and regretting it instantly. §Is a monument of the wizarding world's stupidity and incompetence to treat all sentient magical creatures as beings with the same rights. Of course the centaurs would never consider us equal, but we don't have to show our ignorance with a colossal golden moving statue, we do that quite well on our own.§

§Well spoken,§ Oorjit returned, using his tail to steady himself on his precarious perch on Harry's shoulder. §You wizards certainly have your heads up your arses more often than not.§

§We're like the ostrich that way,§ Harry quipped. §Ignoring what makes us uncomfortable in the hopes it will go away.§

§Couldn't you have come up with something better than the head in the sand metaphor?§

§Sure,§ Harry said. §But why when it worked?§

Oorjit shook his head, murmuring sympathetically, §That was the reason you weren't put in Slytherin.§

§You say that like it's a bad thing,§ Harry teased. §And anyway, I'm not sure dungeon is good on the complexion, have you seen how pasty Snape and Malfoy are?§

§Now where to, Spinks?§ Oorjit asked.

§Spinks as in the famous detective that tracked down Grindelwald's supporters in the years after Dumbledore brought him down or--§

§The second one, spinks, as in an idiot who cleverness is by pure chance.§

Harry pull a face. §Your faith in me warms my heart.§

§You're wel--§

§Wait a minute,§ Harry interrupted. §Gellert Grindelwald was defeated here in Germany! There must be a monument to Dumbledore around somewhere.§

§Nurmengard?§ Oorjit suggested.

§For the greater good?§ Harry scoffed, then paused considering it. §That's it! Oorjit you're a genius!§

§I knew that.§

Harry went on as if he hadn't heard him. §If Voldemort is known to fear Dumbledore, even if he claims he does not, it's the hope of the wizarding Britain and Europe that he is afraid; what if he made a sacrilegious act and defiled the monument of Dumbledore's greatest triumph using of course his Horcrux?§

§Disfiguring the monument that marked Dumbledore's triumph over a great dark wizard... it has possibilities.§

§More than that,§ Harry asserted, popping away at the apparition site and stepping seconds later into the town square of Zauberin.

He headed to the small café he'd seen near the bakery, casting a glamour over Oorjit so as not to frighten the town residents with a class four dangerous beast in their midst. Shopkeepers waved at him along the way as they stood outside talking with each other. Harry waved back and moved away from them before continuing his discussion with Oorjit.

§Not only is he making a mockery out of Dumbledore's bravest feat, he's making a mockery out of Gryffindor's best champion in centuries. No other Gryffindor can claim his prominence in the wizarding world at home and at large. He's the Supreme Mugwump, Chief Warlock, Headmaster of Hogwarts, Leader of the Order of the Phoenix. We're not even talking about what he's accomplished before he got those titles. He's Gryffindor's golden boy. §

§I thought Daniel was. §

§Not even close to the same scale, § Harry argued. §Daniel's a limp flubberworm to Dumbledore's rampaging griffin. §

§You had to make that comparison, § Oorjit grouched. §I think I regurgitated Nagini back there. §

§Disgusting. §

§Then we're even. §

Harry reached the shop and Oorjit leapt from his shoulder to the top of the roofline. As Harry went inside, Oorjit called out, §You should ask somebody about Grindelwald. §

Acknowledging the occamy's words, Harry waved over his shoulder and slipped inside the dark wedge of the shop. Inside it was so dark, it took Harry several minutes of rapid eye blinking to clear his vision. What he saw surprised him. There were vampires in the farthest back of the eatery with charmed windows blocking their corner off from the rest of the patrons, serving to protect them should the door open and let in sunlight.

Besides the vampires there were two other patrons lurking in the interior. A bustling waitress came over to him and beckoned for Harry

to follow her to his booth. Quietly he double checked his translator spell and then slid into the booth, taking the proffered menu.

"You might wish to try a night vision spell. If you don't know one, I'd be happy to cast a temporary one on you."

"No I got it covered, thanks," he murmured and opened his menu, squinting to read text. It was impossible.

He squeezed his eyes shut and hissed under his breath. A moment later Harry opened his eyes and could see the café alight with bright shifting colors. It wasn't day vision, the clarity was still a little off. The world seemed flat to Harry and he started. He'd transformed his own eyes into his basilisk form's eyes!

"Have you decided on anything? What to drink? Eat?" the waitress said, coming back to the table.

Harry focused grimly on the menu before him, refusing to glance up at the waitress. "Please bring me some turnip and ginger juice, and also a hippogriff burger."

"How would you like it cooked?"

"Well done. Hold the tomatoes"

"Be back in a jiffy," she assured him and left.

Harry raised his eyes briefly to watch her back as she walked away. Everything winked in and out of his field of vision. Cautiously, Harry flicked out his tongue and to his amazement the world reoriented itself. He smelled dead meat. Nervous dead meat.

He glanced over to the corner of the café and saw the vampires looking at him startled. At his gaze they quickly averted their faces. He watched their lips, as they broke out heatedly amongst themselves. One particularly panicky vampire kept pointing in his direction. Harry flicked his tongue out again. Recently dead meat. So the vampire was young.

His attention roved to the living meat in the room. They were completely ignorant of him and Harry found their taste dull. Their presence was unexciting to the basilisk senses. Harry concentrated and tried to change back, ignoring the waitress' return with his juice in the meanwhile.

A few minutes later he flopped back with a disgruntled hiss. Not only had he not managed to revert to himself, but had actually progressed some of the changes! His tongue was forked now and his skin was lined with the faint traces of scales. Even the use of Parseltongue didn't help him change! In fact it must have helped progress the changes!

What was he going to do? He looked exactly like what he was-- an animagus stuck in mid transformation. He couldn't talk to anyone now with his tongue changed, they would only hear strange hissing. He frowned when the waitress brought him his burger.

It was cooked. He senses told him that he didn't eat dead things. His eyes slid over to the moving dead things, but he would hunt those kind. Harry tried again to reverse the changes and felt himself growing a few inches.

Completely nonplussed, Harry threw a galleon on the table and ran out the door of the darkened café. He hissed urgently to Oorjit and cast a full body glamour on his person to hide the changes. His goal was the woods, where he would have the privacy needed to work things out one way or the other.

§What happened Harry?§ Oorjit asked as he flew overhead.

Breaking into a run, Harry yelled up, §I used snake language to enhance my eyesight in the café and I wound up transforming my eyes.§

§You did more than that,§ Oorjit observed.

Harry flew past the villagers and made for the field that surrounded the magical town. Running through the rows of crops, he made the tree line and dashed into the forest.

§Direct me to an empty clearing,§ he ordered.

Oorjit shouted down directions and Harry weaved in and out of the maze of trees until he broke into the clearing the occamy had found. Panting, Harry bent over bracing himself on his knees as he caught his breath. Air hissed in and out of his lungs, every breath of air passing his tongue revealing more about the area surrounding him.

He concentrated and tasted chilled water. §Water?§ he asked Oorjit.

Oorjit shook his head. §There's no water here.§

§I smell--taste water.§

§I don't smell anything,§ Oorjit said. §But I'll go look.§

Harry nodded weakly and straightened up as Oorjit launched himself into the air. He looked at his hands and saw that they had formed webbing between them in preparation for dissolving into his body as he became the king of snakes. The scale pattern was emerald green with black lines forming a pattern he didn't quite see.

Harry took off his shirt and pants and sat in the clearing. While looking at his hands he concentrated on merging his limbs into his body. Nothing happened. Annoyed he tried to develop the scale pattern on his skin and saw no change. He thought of the red lock of hair on his head and imagined it to be the scarlet plume of his form and tried to push that transformation.

When the red hair didn't grow Harry growled in annoyance. He was making these changes so effortlessly in the café why couldn't he do it now? It didn't make sense to him. He should be able to do it. Did he need the dark? Was it the presence of the vampires that triggered the change? Harry didn't know.

Just then Oorjit returned and landed beside Harry, folding in his wings. §There's an ice capped river forty kilometers north of us. I don't know how you knew that.§

§I'm the king of snakes,§ Harry mumbled, frowning at his hands.

§You're the what?§

§A basilisk, Oorjit. I am a basilisk.§

§No you're not.§

§I am,§ Harry said wearily. §I just can't complete the changes. I always get stuck. This is the first time since I drank that revealing potion that I got this close and I don't even know how I did it.§

§If you really were a basilisk I would have smelt that,§ Oorjit insisted.

§All the evidence points that way. What do you smell? Taste?§

Oorjit flicked out his tongue. §Snake. You smell like snake.§

§Perhaps I have to completely transform to smell like a basilisk.§

§Your red hair, it turns into the red crest of the king?§

Harry nodded. §If I could make it transform, then yes.§

§Try it.§

§I already have.§

§Try again,§ Oorjit insisted.

Harry concentrated and hissed at his hair to change into the crest of his kingship. A tickling feeling developed in his scalp. The success of something working, elated Harry and he concentrated harder, focusing on the tingling feeling and coaxing it to develop full-fledged.

A sudden ease in the tingling sensation, caused Harry to open his eyes. §Did it work?§ he asked, not daring to hope.

§You, milord, are indeed king of serpents.§

§It worked?§

§Yes, milord.§

§Milord?§ Harry questioned.

Oorjit nodded solemnly. §You are lord of serpents. That's not just a title, it is a heritage.§

Harry looked at the occamy. §Be that as it may, you're my friend, not my vassal. You don't have to call me milord.§

§You are too generous, milord. I could not accept.§

Harry sighed, annoyed. §Don't suck up to me either. Honestly, Oorjit, just help me bloody transform one way or the other. This half-and-half state of existence is bothersome in the extreme.§

§Why don't you try then to change your size. If the key is in your height, you are sorely lacking.§

§Good. Height. Now how do I do that?§

§Close your eyes,§ Oorjit instructed. §Now imagine yourself towering over all of the serpents. See yourself as tall as a king and then imagine that all those below you are as small as ants.§

Harry opened an eye and glowered at Oorjit. §You call that helpful?§

§Did you try it?§ Oorjit returned, staring defiantly at Harry.

§No,§ Harry admitted.

§Try it.§

Harry closed his eyes and thought of his stature as a king and how that would relate to his stature as a snake. He thought about Oorjit and how inferior his snake form was to his own, which would be magnificent. His scarlet crown would proclaim his status to all in the snake kingdom as their lord and master. Their will was his. His desires would be their desires and they would be happy for it.

He thought of Voldemort. The snake-man who thought he could claim lordship over all the snakes, just because he could speak their language. He thought of the power of his person, wrapped all tightly

within his glorious coils and wondered how the snake-man would feel being crushed beneath their weight.

His name would travel at the speed of light throughout all the earth as first Oorjit and then others learned of his name. He was Harry, King of Serpents, the mighty champion of snakes, the protector of the realm of the crawlers.

§Well done, milord,§ Oorjit hissed in approval.

Harry opened his eyes and saw that he was level with the tree tops. He glanced down. His body was curled up in loose coils on the ground and there was Oorjit, bowing. He felt the presence of his basilisk's mind in his head and accepted it as part of himself.

§Rise, Oorjit. Come meet your king in the flesh.§

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 40°«««°»»»°

Chapter 41

Harry sat confidently ensconced in the shrieking shack, leafing through a notebook he had started compiling when the monument that declared Dumbledore's victory over the dark arts (and subsequently the ideals of Voldemort) was mysteriously absent from Germany and England. When asked, people remembered there was a monument and that it was as spectacular as any other they'd ever encountered made in modernity.

The suspiciousness behind the stories came when they were then asked where such a monument was located. The Germans said in England, where Dumbledore was born and raised. The few English witches and wizards asked said it was in Germany. This discrepancy only further supported Harry's theory on what and where the Gryffindor horcrux resided.

In the week since he'd started the journal, he had filled it up considerably with the history of the rise of the Dark Lord Grindelwald and his fall. First and foremost Harry had the ideals on which Grindelwald ran his operation; unlike Voldemort who perpetuated the pureblood ideals, Britain revolved and revolves around to this day, Grindelwald was more of a Wizards' First activist, whose war was on muggles and magical creatures and beings alike. The facts such as his real name Drew Dalling along with newspaper clippings, self-proclaimed first hand accounts of the final duel, and more were all recorded in the journal.

All the details he could pull from people as to the resting place of the monument for equality among all magical beings was also written down. He had checked out several misleads and made several more false starts for his search. Harry was tempted to write to Dumbledore but immediately discarded the idea. If the Headmaster had not realized the missing monument before now, he would be of no further help.

Hedwig chirped from the lofty rafters drawing Harry's attention away from his notes. She had been notably forgiving and had instead of nagging at him found reasons to smother him in affection. She preened his hair when he sat, rested on his shoulder if he went for a

walk or tracked down another lead. She had even given him a dead squirrel for him to eat; which he had politely refused and returned.

Since arriving back in England, he and Flitwick had met twice for NEWT studies. A considerable amount of homework now dominated every other minute of Harry's spare time. The Defense Against the Dark Arts was laughable, he knew more about defending himself than anybody else in Britain and was the course he easily breezed through in practice and in theory.

Flitwick was impressed his charm work and potions but significantly less so with his transfiguration, since he hadn't been keeping in practice. Conjuring was simply easier for him than transmuting the properties of one thing into that of another.

§Pardon me, my lord, but the small man is coming through the passage.§

Harry looked at the small vipera berus, also known as the northern viper, whose scales were as black as coal. He had two of them serving him currently, Reginald and Regina; mates. The bite of such a snake is painful, but rarely fatal. In the hierarchy of snakes, he was higher than the garden snake that Serion had been before he died.

Personally however, the vipera berus was more annoying than Draco Malfoy preening under his daddy's influence. He had the irritating habit of scratching off his scales and bits of skin everywhere. Fortunately his mate was more qualified and personable.

§Thank you, Reginald.§

§Of course, master.§

Harry waved him off and turned toward Oorjit, who was snoozing on the hearth. §Wake-up, Oorjit, we got company coming.§

§Sod off.§

Harry chuckled. §Good, you're back to your old self. No more of that kowtowing.§

§Yes, your majesty,§ Oorjit yawned, uncoiling lazily.

Rolling his eyes, Harry stood up and moved toward the stairwell that led to the secret passageway. He told Flitwick its location and password so that they could meet for his studies without any interference to the charms professor's generous auspices... specifically inference that was run by Dumbledore. When the top of the diminutive professor came through the square hole in the floor, Harry reached down and offered a hand helping him through.

"Thanks, Harry," Filius said graciously, taking out his wand to cast a cleaning spell.

Harry watched as the dust lifted from Flitwick's clothing before spinning off. "Would you like something to drink?"

"Not at the moment, Harry. Shall we duel first or go over the homework?"

"Last week's work or this week's?"

"Outstandings in defense, runes, and potions. Exceeds expectations in transfiguration, charms, and arithmancy. Splendid work to read, I especially enjoyed your counter arguments to animagus transformation, but unfortunately it seems quite impossible to transform ourselves or others into different magical beings because the animal is more sentient and aware."

Harry nodded expecting as much. Flitwick was grading him tougher per request, and writing scrolls was difficult without the use of the Hogwarts' library. "Here's this week's work."

Flitwick took the parchment and sealed scrolls banishing them with a flick of his wrist to his office back at the school. "Did you learn those spells?"

"Thoroughly, sir," Harry replied, waving his wand and silently casting the animagus revealing spell on Hedwig who had just come into the room through the open window up in the rafters. She glowed purple, indicating that Hedwig was just a plain old owl, before the spell dispersed leaving her as white as fresh snow.

"I'll take your word for it," Flitwick said looking proud at his new favorite student.

A second later Flitwick popped out of existence. Harry apparated away quickly as a spell shot from the ceiling to the floor below. The squeezing sensation passed and Harry slid back into the world, crouched low behind the chair where he'd been reading earlier. He placed a disillusionment charm on himself as he quickly scanned the room, before apparating again, disappearing without a noise or trace.

Flitwick exploded the ceiling, causing Hedwig to squawk in alarm and fly around haphazardly to avoid the falling debris. Harry vanished a large ceiling beam and popped away just before a spell splashed against the wall. He came back outside the window and peered inside, pressing his nose flat to the glass.

Nothing stirred inside, Oorjit and Reginald had laid low it seemed. A crack in the shrubbery to his right startled Harry. He glanced over and almost smiled, Flitwick was crouching low in the bushes, stirring them every time he glanced up through the slightly opened window looking for Harry.

Harry imagined a bottomless hole beneath the professor, wordlessly and wandlessly casting the spell learned from defense. The illusion spell rocketed across the short distance slamming into the ground. A yawning hole opened up beneath Flitwick, earning a startled yelp.

Harry smirked and spun on his foot. He reappeared on the roof and crouched low to observe Flitwick's struggle with the illusion of falling forever. He was hoping that the professor had a fear of heights that was disabling to the shorter wizard. A moment later however, a slightly perspired Flitwick was standing on the grass, the disillusionment charm shimmering in the sunlight. It was obvious that the fear of heights was something the diminutive wizard had overcome a long time ago.

Flitwick disappeared once again, but Harry wasn't worried. He had decided to show Flitwick his abilities with Parsletongue magic. The right moment to expose his talent wasn't yet apparent, but he had Oorjit and the others waiting for his signal. Perhaps, he would let

loose with a conjured snake first to see how Flitwick handled them before sending in his underlings.

A bolt of orange streaked past his nose, jerking Harry from his woolgathering. Annoyed, he scolded himself for losing his focus as he leapt off the edge of the roof and used the second spell Flitwick had taught him that week to propel himself into the air, launching his body right up to the clouds with the force of his intentions.

High above the ground, Harry cast an arresto momentum to slow his descent, using the time coming down to scan the roofline and the edge of the Forbidden Forest for signs of his professor. He spotted him down by the base of the derelict chimney when a bird landed on his shoulder. Stifling a laugh, Harry cast in quick succession five stunners and three serpensortias at the bird.

§Steal the wand and subdue the professor,§ Harry commanded as they flew out of his wand.

The giant cobras landed in a disgruntled heaped at Flitwick's feet. The disillusionment dropped after one bit into his leg. Startled, Harry jerked forward in an attempt to move to help. He simultaneously cancelled the spell holding him aloft and with an air blast propelled himself back onto the rooftop. He landed heavily and was running to help Flitwick when the snakes vanished in a puff of smoke and the wizard in question rose up easily to his feet.

"Now Harry did you honestly think I haven't dealt with snakes in a duel situation before? Classic Slytherin."

Harry eyed the live wand in front of him and smiled. "I wasn't really projecting Slytherin so much as I was projecting myself, professor."

"And by that you mean?"

§Now!§ Harry shouted, dodging Flitwick's instinctive spell, falling off the roof and into the shrubbery below.

Oorjit and Reginald flew out from under cloud cover and laughing gleefully, Oorjit threw Reginald at the startled professor's face. Harry for his part, groaned in pain as he shuffled slowly to a sitting position.

Regina was there moments later carrying a vial of Bumps and Bruises Be Gone. Harry tossed his head back draining the vial before throwing it to the side and apparating.

A bone crushing spell nailed him in the leg as soon as he emerged from the transition. Groaning Harry fell to the ground as he leg, unable to carry his weight any longer, collapsed from beneath him.

Flitwick summoned Harry's wand, or tried to, but Harry managed to hang onto it. Rolling to his side, Harry dodged another bone crusher before gaining control over his leg with a hasty level one Healer spell for splints. He hobbled to a standing position, relying heavily on shields as Flitwick honed in on him.

There was no escape that wouldn't concede defeat. If Harry apparated, with his leg broken as it was, he would likely splinch himself. He hadn't time to make a portkey while defending himself. Grimly aware of his mistake where alternate escapes were concerned, Harry filed it away to upbraid himself with later; right now he was more worried with how Flitwick had located him coming out of the apparition. Had he made noise?

The answer was to be determined later as Flitwick's spell casting sped up and flashes of light blasted apart on Harry's shield. He had to keep changing the shield to deflect purely magical or physical spells with more and more rarity shields thrown in as Flitwick got more creative. Sound shields gonged loudly, air shields cracked thunderously, and water shields erupted violently under the professor's onslaught.

Finally Harry had to do something or lose as his strength weakened. It was awfully hard to maintain balance with his bummed leg and so Harry did the only thing he could think of--

§Incapacitate Flitwick!§ he shouted in Parseltongue, drawing on magic to create the effect he wanted so his words would not be interpreted as orders to his snakes.

§My Lord!§ Oorjit cried out circling above Harry alongside Hedwig who looked ready to plummet with talons outstretched at Flitwick.

§Knock him unconscious!§ Harry bellowed as more spells splashed against his shield.

Suddenly the spells stopped and Harry cautiously looked around his solid metal shield to find Flitwick fallen his wand floating high in the air directly above him.

“About bloody time,” Harry grouched, dropping his shield and summoning Flitwick’s wand to him. “I almost lost to the scoundrel. Again.”

Harry stumped over to his professor and nudged him in the side and satisfied with his win, released the professor from his stunned state. Flitwick blinked open his eyes and smiled sheepishly as Harry helped him up and handed back his wand.

“Good show,” Harry said amiably.

Flitwick’s eyes flashed guiltily and Harry wondering opened his mouth to ask why when suddenly he slumped forward. Flitwick caught him and lowered Harry to the ground just as a second Flitwick walked out of the tree line.

“Excellent, excellent,” he squeaked, envenerating Harry.

Harry for his part looked up in confusion at the two professors, certain he was seeing double from hitting his head on the ground when one of them started to shimmer. Amazed, Harry watched as the form of one Filius Flitwick bubbled and gurgled until popping, revealing a tiny sixth year with radish earrings.

“Luna!” Harry exclaimed, struggling to sit up.

“I’m so sorry Harry!” she said, crouching down to him and helping him sit. “Professor Flitwick would only let me come if I helped him beat you.”

“And you certainly did. Thirty points to Ravenclaw.” Flitwick grinned, hopping on the balls of his feet. “Never let your guard down, Harry,” he lectured. “That was your aha... biggest mistake. Good show, really had me worried for a moment when you knocked Luna out.”

"You were the one throwing all those spells at me?" Harry asked wonderingly.

Luna nodded, blushing happily. "Yes, I saw the spells and knew that to win I had to use them."

"Saw?" Harry questioned.

She nodded. "They turned out pretty good if I do say so."

"You mean you never cast some of those before?"

"Oh no," she explained. "I just divined them from the bowtruckles in the bush behind you."

Bemused, Harry looked over his shoulder. "Bowtruckles?"

"Miss Lovegood is a natural diviner," Flitwick explained. "Ordinary and in many cases extraordinary objects bring forth her powers."

"Hardly a natural, Professor," Luna rebutted. "If I had been I would have seen Harry a long time ago."

"Excuse me?" Flitwick asked, troubled by her wording.

Luna nodded, pushing her blonde hair back behind her ears. "Harry was invisible, sir."

"Invisible?"

"Well he certainly wasn't divisible now was he?" she teased, before turning solemn eyes on Harry. "We really should fix your leg."

"Good shot," Harry said by way of congratulations. "Might I enquire on how in Merlin's pants did you know where I would be when I disappeared?"

"The air told me."

"I made a noise?" Harry asked, aghast that his control slipped that much during the fight.

“No, no, silly. Sound didn’t tell me, air did.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I, Harry,” said Flitwick, bending down and opening a potion vial. Harry took it and with a grimace drank deeply from it. “Trust me when I say aha... asking for explanations only seem to befuddled our limited understanding even more.”

Luna cast a diagnostic spell on his leg and pronounced that the potion was healing it without any complications. Harry was glad that rebreaking and setting the bone were not going to be needed. Elation bubbled in his chest at the sight of his friend and without thinking about it he reached over and grasped Luna in a hug.

Flitwick smiled at the pair of them, humming delightedly under his breath. They broke apart a moment later and Luna settled herself on the cold ground beside Harry, continuing Flitwick’s aimless humming when the professor broke off.

“I’ll run you into the ground for Charms and Transfiguration later, Harry. Be sure to be back at the castle by midnight this evening Miss Lovegood or Ravenclaw will be docked fifty points and you’ll receive several detentions.”

When Luna didn’t respond Harry nudged her. He gave a helpless smile to Flitwick and offered, “I’ll be sure to watch the time for her.”

“In that case I’ll return to my office. There’s bound to be several desperate seventh years needing my attention.”

Harry laughed. “And I bet quite a few of them are Hufflepuffs.”

“You’d be surprised,” Flitwick returned knowingly, waving goodbye over his shoulder as he took the path down through Hogsmeade back to Hogwarts instead of the secret entrance.

Once he was out of sight, Harry nudged Luna again and said teasingly, “So, what are the wrackspurts telling you these days?”

“They’ve been unusually quiet,” she responded, quitting her humming to meet his gaze with bright blue eyes. “I’m afraid I told them off for putting you in danger with Lord You-Who.”

“Lord You-Who?”

“Lord Thingy or What’s-His-Name. Voldemort, the one whose name everybody is afraid to think let alone say aloud. It’s short for You-Know-Who.”

“By one syllable.”

Luna nodded delighted that he understood, which frankly he didn’t, but Harry wasn’t going to argue.

“With the wrackspurts gone things have been dreadfully dull. I tried listening to the drezitts but as I’m sure you know they’re not very talkative and when they speak at all it is usually plain mundane things and not about things to come.”

“Of course, drezitts,” Harry murmured. “What do they look like again?”

“Honestly Harry,” Luna scoffed. “They’re figments. Figments don’t take form.”

Harry shook his head. “I give. You win. Drezeitss speak too plainly for creative interpretation. Got it.”

Luna sank backwards, lying face up in the snow. Idly she wiggled her arms and feet a little creating an awkward snow angel. Harry stared down at her thinking quietly to himself. He was glad she was here even if she was dreadfully confusing.

“Your occamy is quite beautiful,” she noted casually. Harry followed her gaze to see Oorjit perched on the edge of the roof. “Looks just like the one Professor Hobday kept in his classroom. That one had a nasty temper.”

"It is the one Hobday kept in the classroom," Harry declared, verifying her observation. "He was angry and rightfully so, I think. Oorjit never did give me the details."

"Thank you," she said quietly, turning her full luminescent gaze on him.

Harry squirmed uncomfortably. "Why?"

"I knew you were a Parselmouth, I had hoped you would come to tell me in time."

"Ah," Harry said, beckoning Oorjit with a hiss. "I might have let that slip without realizing it."

"Because you're so comfortable around me," Luna admitted dreamily.

Harry stayed quiet. He wasn't sure why he had let out his closest kept secret, or at least one of them.

Oorjit landed in Harry's lap. He refused to stand on the cold ground and curled up to conserve warmth. §You beckoned, my lord?§

§I think Luna would like to pet you. If she does let her,§ Harry warned. §No posturing. You're to be on your best behavior.§

Luna looked on curiously. "What did you say to him?"

"To mind his manners. I want to impress you."

"Why?"

Harry shrugged. "You're the first I've told about this gift of mine."

"Speaking with snakes must be fun. I bet they have clever things to say," Luna mentioned offhandedly as she rubbed the satin soft texture of Oorjit's slick head.

Oorjit crooned low in his throat and angled up into her touch. Harry wished he was the occamy for a moment before decidedly shoving that thought from his mind. He was king and not some lowly belly crawler. Oorjit, and all the others, envied him, coveted him.

“Alas,” she sighed wistfully. “Snakes are one of the few species that I can’t hear.”

“That’s because they’re usually self-centered and arrogant. If it doesn’t concern them it’s of no consequence.”

“Oh, I see. I thought it was because I didn’t share in the gift. I can’t divine on Mermish either.”

Harry smirked. “Who could? They’re quite ghastly to listen to above water and if you swam with them all the time you’d be a wrinkled prune.”

Luna laughed, sitting up and standing, dusting off her jacket. She held a hand out to him and after a moment’s hesitation, when Oorjit took flight, Harry grasped it. Her hand was smooth and cold beneath his. She let go and so did Harry.

“Shall we grab a Butterbeer?”

“Wouldn’t that defeat the purpose of Dumbledore not finding out that I’m around?”

“He knows already. The Headmaster’s just waiting for the right moment and opportunity to come collect you.”

“And you divined this?”

“Common sense,” she refuted.

“I could use more of that.”

“I saw that you need my help,” she mentioned as they started down the path away from the haunted building. “With what--that’s another story. How can I help you Harry?” she asked earnestly. “I would very much like to be of assistance.”

Harry sighed and absently scratched the back of his neck. With a gesture he summoned for his journal and a few moments later it came whizzing up the path, smacking into a tree. Harry bent to pick it up and held it out to her.

"I'm searching for the monument depicting Dumbledore's victory over Grindelwald. British wizards--"

"And witches--"

"And witches, say it's in Germany, and the Germans believe it's here in England."

"Oh, a riddle. I love riddles."

"But certainly not a junior Riddle. Or senior for that matter."

"Clever conundrum, Harry. You should write some for the Quibbler. We publish them in every Sunday edition."

"Tantalizing titillations to tickle-- I lost it," Harry gave up, chuckling.

"To tickle tireless..." Luna frowned, before supplying, "Puzzlers."

"That didn't alliterate," Harry noted as they entered the town.

"But it could arithmecate," she replied, pleased as punch.

"Arithmetic?"

"That didn't rhyme."

"Aha," Harry murmured, reaching out to open the door to the Three Broomsticks. "Why don't you find yourself a seat while I grab us a couple of Butterbeers."

"I'll start looking over this journal while you do," she answered agreeably crossing the threshold.

Harry followed her into the blast of noise and quickly separated, making a beeline to the counter where Madam Rosmerta was taking orders as quickly as she could. Hagrid was there at the bar, ordering a bucket of Firewhiskey. Harry glanced over his shoulder, locating Luna before his eyes slid one booth over and saw McGonagall and Snape sitting together.

“Now that’s an odd couple,” Harry muttered, seeing that they were nursing drinks together talking quick happily with one another.

“What can I get you dear?”

Harry returned his attention back to Rosmerta and placed his order.

“That’d be one galleon and six sickles and four knuts.”

He gave her the money and took the drinks, carefully maneuvering his way across the crowded interior. Slipping into the booth he slid one over to Luna, who opened it with a pleased sigh.

“No better sound in the world than the breaking of a Butterbeer seal,” she said, taking a swig.

Harry cracked his and grinned. “I guess not. What have you had time to read?”

Luna flipped through the first few pages. “Not much, but give me twenty minutes and we’ll be getting somewhere.”

“Sure,” Harry said, leaning back and relaxing in his booth. “I got time.”

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 41°«««°»»»°

Chapter 42

Harry watched Luna disappear into the secret passageway an hour from midnight. He was worried that she wouldn't make it back in time but her breezy response eased any anxiety that he had. He waited until the top of her flaxen blonde head vanished in the dark below.

"Luna, lumos!" Harry shouted down at her. "You're going to need light!"

"Don't be silly, Harry, it's plenty well lit."

"Not when I shut the trapdoor," he called out.

Her voice rang back sweetly. "Ah, but only then will the garhoulees, you know, the passageway's spirit guardians, will come out. They have such a pretty glow to them. They will light my way."

Harry shrugged and shut the trapdoor. If garhoulees would light her way, who was he to say otherwise. Still he hoped she would use her wand to cast a lumos before she tripped and fell over. If she did trip, she'd probably say it was the wolf guardian that got in her way or something equally off the wall.

But off the wall or not, Luna was smart. Harry didn't believe for one minute that the her crazy act was just an act. If things nobody saw or heard spoke to her and she could understand that made her smarter than many other Ravenclaws he could name.

§What did she have to say?§ Oorjit asked, lifting his head from on top of his coils.

§She found it, I'm pretty sure."

§Does that mean we have to go then?§ Oorjit bellyached.

Harry nodded. §Yes, Oorjit, it does.§

§As you wish, my lord.§

Harry bumbled around getting ready for bed. He slipped into warm flannel pajama bottoms and brushed his teeth, spitting into the exposed sink and rinsing his mouth. A good feeling welled up inside his chest as he turned back to the makeshift sofa.

With a wave of his hand it transfigured into a large and regal canopy bed. Rich satin sheets tucked themselves under the mattress as the feather pillows fluffed themselves in preparation. With a contented sigh, Harry dived between the sheets, fully relaxing. Stretching once, so that all his muscles quivered deliciously he grunted in appreciation as all the small kinks worked themselves out.

He slipped into his Occlumency practice, slowing his breathing to deep even breaths. Slowly falling down into his subconscious, Harry controlled the fall, landing with a springy bounce on the balls of his feet. He spent a few minutes in the room that held his animagus form; the green lights had coalesced into the glittering form of his basilisk.

The basilisk was awake when Harry poked his head in and Harry stepped fully inside. It was here he learned to control the animal mind and where he took lessons from it. The basilisk was rubbing off on Harry in much the same fashion that Harry was rubbing off on it. An exchange of personality and traits had transpired. When Harry received his lock of red hair, crowning him king of the snakes, the basilisk here in his mind received a streak of jet black.

They couldn't so much as exchange words as the glittering lights that made up the basilisk body didn't understand Parseltongue or English, but there was an exchange of images. Connecting with his form on a nightly basis gave Harry great control over the process of his transformation. He was no longer subjected to its whims but the other way around. If Harry wanted scales, he could obtain scales and nothing else. The same was true for most other features of the basilisk.

The exchanged body parts would appear here on this glimmering ghost of his form. The human parts of Harry would reside here deep within his brain and the reptilian would shimmer into existence on Harry. This process and understanding had only come to Harry after he had fully transformed once. Now it was something he included

every time he came into his meditation before continuing on with his Occlumency shields.

One of the things he'd been trying to figure out was a set of shields that would activate should another Occlumens, who used fire as his weapons and defenses, come across his wind shields. He did not want another incident where his defenses were used to bolster his attacker. His goal was to find a way to take away the fuel aspect of his windy presence without having the absence of it from his mind.

Harry spent an hour down there tweaking with his shields. If only he could add another element like water for defenses. The solution didn't come to Harry and he slipped back out of his meditation, clear of thoughts and random images as he fell into a deep and blissful sleep.

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Harry left Hedwig in Hogsmeade as he apparated with Oorjit the next morning to a location midway between Britain and Germany in the middle of the water. No, literally his coordinates were in the water. Luna believed that the reason the statue was lost to memory was because of a Fidelus-like Charm and if Harry was going to get close enough to crack the ward he would have to apparate into the water and swim around until he got confused and misdirected.

Hopefully the Tempeski Charm that she gave him would keep him from getting overly confused by the wards. Of course, he couldn't put all his faith into the charm, after all he didn't even know what a Tempeski was.

With a last gasping breath Harry squeezed out of the dark tubes of Apparition space plunging ten feet straight down. Oorjit cursed loudly, flinging himself from Harry, flapping his wings mightily to gain air. Harry on the other hand barely had time to cast a wandless warming charm before he hit the icy darkness of the water below.

He broke the surface of the water with a loud exclamation. "Yahrrrrr!!"

§Cold?§ Oorjit inquired.

§Piss off,§ Harry panted, strengthening his warming charm and kicking off.

§If only you hadn't dropped us in the middle of nowhere! Where are we?§

Harry swam east, using the sunlight as a guide. §We,§ he began swallowing a mouthful of water. §We are right where Luna directed us to be.§

§If you ask me,§ Oorjit sniffed. §That girl doesn't have all her gobstones. Absolutely loony.§

Harry glared up at the avian snake. §Well, you'd be wrong. Luna's brilliant.§

§Perhaps you're right,§ Oorjit conceded, flying above Harry's head looking out at the empty horizon. §After all she's not the stupid one swimming out here in the middle of nowhere.§

§Well I can fix that pretty easily,§ Harry said as he stopped swimming and kicked out idly in the water.

He closed his eyes, focusing on his basilisk form and called it up to the surface. The change was quick and painless. He grew to be eighty feet long, twelve feet thick. His body stretched out for the first time not being coiled up and Harry felt colossal. In this form, Harry was the mythical legend of the sea serpent, the loch ness monster, the nightmare from the deep.

He struck out, his body coiling and uncoiling, sluicing gracefully through the water. It took a matter of a few hours to locate themselves in the water in location to the hidden island. Luna had been spot on, it just took them time to find it. Surprisingly, Harry and Oorjit hadn't been confused once in the search. It was suspicious, but ignorable for the time being.

On the island Harry encountered a large blank space of land where nothing grew. There weren't any trees or rocks, just dirt and sand.

§It's here,§ Harry determined.

The wards surrounding the area were a tricky lot, the toughest Harry had ever seen. The first layer alone would burn, scorch, and sear him to a crisp or at least blacken Harry beyond all recognition. Several fires wards interconnected to make the layer, with enough booby-traps interlaced to stop a whole team of cursebreakers dead in their tracks. Literally.

The second layer was created with rocks. Harry could imagine the pulverizing and crushing with ease and not with a little trepidation. He hadn't dealt with rock wards before, and his knowledge garnered from connecting with Bill Weasley was miniscule. Egyptians didn't deal with rocks so much as earth and sand.

The third layer, Harry could barely see, the web of spells creating the first two masked the second to last one from view. From what Harry could guess it was a simple befuddlement line. Something Harry didn't understand when the island itself as a whole had been hidden from the wizarding world at large for years. After the line, Harry didn't know what was coming for it was just a bright blur of light with no delineation.

With a deep breath Harry rolled up his sleeves and got to work. It took time to unweave the fire spells. Harry set off three booby-traps in the process. One of which release a hoard of inferi. He got rid of the mindless bodies by funnily enough, guiding them into the third booby-trap set off shortly after.

The fire circle was Voldemort's idea of a joke, giving the trapped victim plenty of time to recognize the futility of escape and even more to watch death approach on swift heels. Voldemort probably wasn't expecting Harry's use of the circle or he wouldn't have put it in the layer.

The heat from the fires parched Harry, until he was forced to break and drink water. Augamenti didn't work on the island which greatly displeased Harry. Instead he had to banish Oorjit to Britain with clear instructions to bring him drinkable water. Five minutes later he summoned his familiar back and greedily drank the water provided. It didn't appease his thirst, but it would have to do until he got past the fire layer.

An hour later, Harry had done just that, cracking the anti-water section last. The minute it was gone Harry conjured a stream from his wand and drank his fill, feeling at once gluttonous at the sheer amount he consumed and satiated. His thirst quenched, Harry took a break conjuring a large tent to rest within. Oorjit curled up inside next to him and napped, gently wheezing. Harry did the same thinking to rest only for a little bit to gain his strength.

A loud hissing noise woke Harry as he was finally falling asleep. Oorjit was hovering over his face speaking quickly down at him. Harry screwed up his eyes and reached blindly for his glasses, shoving them onto his nose to get a clearer look at the distraught snake.

§Yes?§ said Harry, propping up on his elbows. §What is it?§

§The sun is being blocked out by giant rock formations, my lord.§

§What?§

§No light. Big rocks,§ Oorjit repeated slower, lacing his words with heavy sarcasm.

As the words registered, Harry woke up fully and vanished the tent. Sure enough it was just as Oorjit had said. Rocky outcroppings were jutting out of the ground and growing at an alarming rate.

§STOP!§ Harry commanded the rocks, assured that they would do his bidding. Parsel magic had yet to fail him.

They trembled at his words and slowed, but still they grew. Flabbergasted at their continued growth, Harry stared at them. Then determined not to be entombed by the rocks Voldemort made, Harry whipped out his wand and leveled it at the first formation on his left.

“Reducto!” Harry bellowed.

The rock erupted with a spray of stone shards flying everywhere. When the dust settled, there where the old formation had been a new one was taking its place, growing faster, reaching the height of the other giants in a few seconds.

Frowning Harry turned on his heel and apparated out of the circular rock formation, shoving through the clinging anti-apparition ward with ease. His head swam for a moment, but quickly righted as Harry sprinted for the ward keystones.

§HARRY!§ Oorjit shouted as a fifth stone cropping broke out over his head trapping the occamy inside the rocky grave.

§I'm hurrying!§ Harry called back, scrambling quickly through the ward strands, snipping helter-skelter at them praying he didn't cut the wrong one or set off another trap.

Untangling the last two, Harry eyed them worriedly. One was a booby-trap and the other line the one that was going to break apart the rock formations. The booby-trap was certain to crush Harry where he sat, the last defense to stop intruders making it through the rock layer.

Harry took a deep breath and broke the one in his right hand, apparating simultaneously. When he reappeared he saw that a large rock had fallen right where he'd been. Harry took a moment to marvel his good fortune when a panicked curdling scream echoed from the outcropping.

§I'm coming!§ Harry yelled, banishing the large stone into the ocean.

Grabbing the last line anchored to the rock keystone, Harry snapped it and the rocks vanished as if they'd never been. Oorjit was discovered huddling in a little ball, his sides trembling so violently, Harry could see them from where he crouched.

§You can relax,§ Harry informed him, amused at his friend's behavior.

Oorjit lifted his head and looked around, immediately relaxing as he noted the danger was indeed gone. §Took you long enough,§ he snipped.

§Not so brave are you?§ Harry teased.

Oorjit sniffed disdainfully. §I've no idea what you are talking about.§

§I heard you scream like a snakling.§

§I did not!§ Oorjit said, offended at the very idea.

Harry smirked. §You forget that I heard you. Should I provide you with the memory?§

Oorjit huffed irritably. §No, thank you,§ he answered prissily.

§As you wish,§ Harry acquiesced, dropping the matter.

Raising his occlumency shields Harry stared at the statue that was slowly being revealed as the protective wards around it were dropped.

§We got to get rid of this ward to focus on the rest,§ Harry explained, pointing at the befuddlement line. §The others look pretty straight forward. There's two more element sets, water and wind. Shocker there. The next one is a piece of cake; it's an anti-human ward. That would explain why we didn't get confused trying to find the island once we got near it. It's also the ward that confounded the whole wizard community. We'll get by that without a problem. I'll just transform again. Then--§ Harry frowned. §Is that a blood ward?§

§I don't know what you're talking about,§ Oorjit hissed, slithering away.

Harry's frown deepened, then cleared. §Hold it right there Oorjit,§ he commanded, before easily breaking the befuddling circle with a spell.

Oorjit's expression sharpened. §Right, as you were saying, my lord.§

§We should be wary of the water layer, seeing as how tricky the last two were.§

§If you'll excuse me, my lord,§ Oorjit murmured, pointing with his tail. §I think I'll go over there and get out of your way.§

Harry raised an eyebrow. §You do that and I'll handle the ward.§

Oorjit glided smoothly away, disappearing around a sharp bend. With Oorjit gone, Harry got back to work. Examining the new layer Harry

bit his lip as he puzzled out the strands. The web was bright orange with thick dots here and there indicating the triggers that would set off the ward, alerting the caster, and the potential booby-traps.

He tugged at one that pulsed brighter than the others.

“Curious,” he muttered under his breath, tugging on it harder. “What do you do?” he asked it.

Harry pointed his wand at the strand and cast a severing charm. It broke off and started to wiggle back and forth. Harry eyed it beadily.

“Peculiar.”

§GARRH!§

Harry’s head jerked up. Oorjit came flying back around the corner, a huge wall of water following. Harry swore and turned his attentions back to the ward, picking it apart as rapidly as possible.

§In the name of all that is Apep, what is taking you so long!§

§Shut up,§ Harry growled, feeling water begin to rain down on him from the crushing sheet of water hurtling towards him.

Harry tore all the strands apart at once, activating all the booby-traps in one glorious instant before they collapsed utterly drenching the two intruders. Oorjit looked like a drowned rat. Harry broke out laughing, ignoring his own tragic state and laughed uproariously at Oorjit’s sour expression.

§You twit! This is no laughing matter!§

Harry chuckled harder. §You look ridiculous.§

§You don’t look much better,§ Oorjit grumped.

§Be nice,§ Harry snickered. §Or I won’t perform a drying charm on you.§

Oorjit looked appalled.

§Dry off and be warm,§ Harry intoned merrily, waving his hand first at his friend then at himself, sighing with pleasure as the magic did its job. §Much better, don't you agree?§

Oorjit hissed an affirmative and Harry sobering, walked forward gazing intently at the fully exposed statue.

§You would think the artist would display better judgment. This is as revolting as that other statue in Germany,§Harry commented dryly, looking on at the cowering Grindelwald.

On Dumbledore's likeness was a golden garter, wrapped strangely enough over his raised forearm, when it was usually worn on the leg. His face held a fierce some expression, one Harry had seen on the older version many times, the first time when he'd been eleven and had tried to tell the truth of what happened down in the dungeons with Quirrell.

"You're not so terrifying," he told the statue. "Or brave."

§Mocking a statue, sire?§ Oorjit asked dryly.

§No,§ Harry replied looking down. §Just telling the geezer the truth.§

§I still can't imagine a Gryffindor wearing that,§ Oorjit commented. §It's ghastly.§

Harry looked at the visage of Dumbledore. §It was a sign of chivalry. Lady Ravenclaw had one too. The family lost it in the great raid of 1537 though. Pity. She was the only witch to receive one.§

§Gryffindors are nothing if not chivalrous.§

§Or liars.§

§Annoying the whole lot,§ Oorjit concluded.

§Come,§ said Harry. §We've still got wards to break.§

§Oh sweet rapture.§

§Exceedingly,§ Harry agreed with a smirk.

A few minutes with the wind keystone and the whole lot of them dropped without a singular instance. Harry transformed into his basilisk form and slithered past the anti-human ward without difficulty. On the other side he broke the ward by displacing the location of its keystone. When it fell there was a loud roar, an explosion of sound as the island entered back into the wizarding world's collective conscious.

Harry figured he had but a few moments with the blood wards before Voldemort or Dumbledore found out and came investigating. By that point Harry had better have left the island with the garter or there'd be hell to pay.

§I don't suppose you know how to get past blood wards do you?§ Harry muttered, looking disgusted.

§You speak snake language. Perhaps your blood is of Slytherin decent?§

§Potters are pure as the driven snow. They don't associate with dark wizards.§

§Except for that werewolf... oh, and that Black fellow.§

§Yes, well... we don't breed with them I suppose I should say.§

A loud crack sounded; someone had apparated to the island. Swearing Harry faced the problem fully and glared at the keystone situated well out of reach for the aspiring meddler.

§We don't have time for this,§ Oorjit reminded.

§I know!§ Harry growled, looking over his shoulder as a long bearded wizard came running around the corner.

"Harry!" Dumbledore shouted in alarm. "What are you doing here?"

"Disabling booby-traps, stealing artifacts, you know, being a regular little troublemaker," Harry said as Oorjit rose up, hissing angrily at the newcomer.

Another crack sounded.

“Do you know how to get past blood wards?” Harry asked seriously, staring hard at the Headmaster.

Dumbledore looked taken aback. “Afraid not. Well, unless your blood is connected in some way. Why?”

“Don’t have time to explain,” Harry replied, a crazy thought coming to him.

“Why don’t we have time?” Dumbledore inquired, hurrying closer.

“Because that crack was a pissed off dark lord apparating to the island.”

Harry took a breath then and ran past the blood line, cringing all the way. It was a stupid bloody Gryffindor thing to do and he was being bloody stupid doing it. He hissed at the uncomfortable sensation of his blood prickling wildly throughout his body and grabbed the golden garter.

“POTTER!” roared Voldemort, flying straight toward him from the other side like an angry wraith.

“Tom.”

Voldemort paused for a brief moment, assessing Dumbledore’s presence on Harry’s other side and smirked. “Dumbledore, so nice of you to join Harry and I. Run along now Harry,” Voldemort ordered. “Albus and I are going to have a little chat. We’ll meet up later, yes?”

As spells flew out of the older wizards wands, Harry took no time apparating away, grabbing the end of Oorjit’s tail at the last moment, bringing them both back safely.

§You’re in trouble now,§ Oorjit hissed.

§Dumbledore will believe what he wants to believe, he always does. I don’t care.§

§Perhaps, but you should care, sire, that Voldemort knows you've got one of his Horcruxes!§

Harry grimaced. §We'll just have to work fast to find that last one now.§

§And hope he doesn't make more while we're searching for it!§

§He won't. He's cocky,§ Harry assured the occamy. §Seven is after all better than thirteen. With seven he thinks he's assured victory.§

§If seven is so powerful, how are you beating him?§ Oorjit asked, worry etched in his voice.

§I don't know,§ Harry replied, frowning at Oorjit's concern. §Prophecy?§ he offered.

§Destiny,§ Oorjit scoffed. §Is this a case of an irresistible force against another irresistible force?§

§No,§ Harry rebutted swiftly. §No. I am the irresistible force and Voldemort is the unmovable object.§

§We're finally going to have an answer to that riddle, aren't we?§

§So it would seem.§

--

Oorjit looked up from his perch on the right hand side of Harry's throne as Milo the boa constrictor hissed pardon for the intrusion. Harry flicked the scroll he was writing on closed, setting it aside to finish later for Flitwick before looking at Milo. Hedwig hooted regally from her perch on his left.

Milo ducked his head beneath the stares of three sets of eyes and announced, §You have a diplomat here to see you sire.§

§Another one?§ Harry groused, remembering the centaurs and their vague ways.

Oorjit chuckled. §Plenty more to come as well I would imagine. Who is it Milo?§

§He--that is to say I--§ Milo hedged.

§Who, Milo?§ Harry demanded, impatient to finish his Charms essay.

§Aragog's ambassador--it wouldn't say its name.§

Surprised, Harry nodded allowing the visit while whispering to Oorjit to tell the venomous guards to be alert. An acromentula was a dangerous creature, and even more dangerous when scared. This ambassador was either very brave or very foolish to enter into the snake pit.

It came scuttling in with all eight of its eyes trained on the floor. Its pinchers clicked furiously, showing its anxiety for the present situation. Harry sat back and waited for it to speak first.

"My king sent me to speak with you," it broke out, gibbering recklessly.

"On what grounds? We are embittered enemies. I hold power over all of you, even your king. What on earth could Aragog want, be presumptuous enough to send you to me for?"

It gibbered angrily before calming itself. "Father wants to ensure our freedom, food, and shelter. He does not want war."

"Because he could not win, and he knows it. Your freedom can be whatever the wizards will allow you and as for your food it shall be restricted. No humans, wizards, centaurs, or snakes."

"No humans? No centaurs or foals? Outrageous!"

"It is done. Tell Aragog my commands."

"My king does not take orders!"

"He will take mine," Harry said firmly, narrowing his eyes in distaste. "I do not want your clearing. I have no intentions of taking it over. Aragog should reward me for my restraint. I am letting you all live on

my land and as such I demand your full withdrawal from Voldemort's camp. If I see one more spider I will kill you all and be done with it."

"You would not dare!" sputtered the angry acromentula.

Harry stood up, his guards slithered closer. "I am King here, spider. You do not tell me what I can or can not do. I tell you and your king the laws. You will obey or the reasons why Basilisks and spiders are enemies will not be a distant memory anymore but a fresh one written with your tribe's blood. Now be gone!"

The acromentula clicked impotently a few more times before scurrying back up when Harry's guard started to advance. When the spider was out of sight, Harry sighed and sat down, opening his scroll once more. Oorjit said nothing; Hedwig hooted in commiseration. Picking up his quill Harry forced his focus away from the delegate's words and the indignation they brought. The meeting was over, his essay was not.

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 42°«««°»»»°

Chapter 43

§My lord,§ Regina hissed softly, lurking in the shadows. §There's a blond witch in the passage way.§

Harry threw down the garter with relief. The bloody thing was entirely too clever of an object. As a Horcrux Harry had no idea how to break it open so he could defeat the soul fragment inside. Obviously he couldn't fill it with his blood like the cup or with memories as with the diary. He couldn't even put a leg in it, which he tried, but the garter was not like the ring, a pureblood's finger would not release it. Not even if he was an heir to a pureblood line.

There was nothing he could give the garter, not love or courage. How could one give something inanimate courage? So while Luna's presence was unexpected it was a happy occurrence that gave his beleaguered mind something else to think about other than diplomats, horcruxes, or his... Hermione.

"Hello Harry," Luna chirped, skipping into the room.

"Luna, what brings you here?" he asked, graciously offering her a spot on one of the shabby furnishings.

"The tabittes told me you were stumped by a plover," she answered, throwing herself happily onto a couch. "Not to worry though, plovers are easy to manage. My daddy taught me all about them."

"You can call them Horcruxes, Luna," Harry said with fond exasperation.

Luna stared at him blankly. "I'm sure I've no idea what you are talking about."

"Right."

"Well, I don't," she repeated, tilting her nose up slightly.

Harry smirked. "And we'll say that I believe you. I will say I'm hurt. Don't you ever visit me because you miss me and not because strange critters tell you to do so?"

Luna turned serious, startling Harry. "Now, Harry," she informed him briskly, reminding him of Hermione. "You don't have much time with the seventh plover knowing what he now knows. You must get to work."

"I am," he grumped, stalking to the couch and picking up the golden garter. "This bloody thing hasn't nudged. Not once when I touch it has it zinged like the cup or buzzed like the others."

"That's because it senses you are not a threat."

Harry screwed up his eyes. "How do you reckon that? I destroyed its brothers."

"Because only a selfless act of bravery will kill it. The plover doesn't understand the courage it takes to willingly go into a losing battle. Just like with the last plover that dealt with love, the selflessness of placing another's desires and heart above your own just doesn't make sense. He has always looked out for himself, making sure he survives. Nobody else comes into the equation."

Harry took the garter back from her and sunk down on the derelict couch. "So you're saying I have to see that somebody survives something even if it might cost me my life?"

Luna nodded primly, reminding him forcefully of Hermione again. "Or your happiness."

Harry twisted the garter. "So Voldemort--"

"The plover," Luna insisted.

Harry nodded absently as she sat beside him. The couch sunk further down, stuffing oozing out of a hole at the other end.

"I have to do something to be worthy of the garter. Clever, Voldemort-- err the plover-- is challenging the history of the object."

Luna nodded, a familiar vacant expression drifting over her features as she stared off into the distance. "He doesn't believe anyone could

truly do something so noble. His experience with human nature is not of its good side.”

Harry snorted. “It’s not like he goes looking for it.”

“But you do, Harry,” Luna said coming back from wherever she’d been. She grabbed his hands. “You always reach out for the good life can bring.”

Harry pulled his hands back. “Yeah,” he said defiantly. “Look what good it’s done me.”

“You have to let the hand life dealt you go,” Luna replied. “Or it’ll explode.”

“Exploding Snap metaphors now Luna?” Harry asked bemused.

“Hermione is the best thing that’s ever happened to you,’ she said bluntly, with total clarity and conviction.

Harry glanced up at the tone in her voice. She gave him a defiant look of her own attempting to cow him.

“She’s been crying ever since she gave you that ridiculous ultimatum. I would have stopped her, but even I don’t know everything. Foolish witch.”

“But Luna--”

“No buts, Harry,” Luna replied, quelling his response. “She thought to force you to see the truth of the matter, forgetting you are just a boy and in normal situations it would be bad enough, but you have always been raised without love. It’s hard for you to trust in it. You want too. Badly. But you’re afraid of getting burnt.

“Hermione ending up with Daniel as she did was a fear you’ve always harbored-- and not even specifically about Hermione, but anyone you loved, you felt would follow suit with what others have done-- believe in Daniel, love Daniel, choose Daniel over you.”

“Luna, please,” Harry begged.

“No Harry, you’ve got to hear this. Now be quiet,” she shushed him, taking one of his hands again. “As you are a boy and completely clueless, I will spell it out for you.

“Hermione loves you, unconditionally, even if her rash behavior doesn’t do her justice. She was desperate to be in your good graces again. You have to accept that you are loveable and that you deserve love. You’ll also have to be the bigger person in the relationship and forgive her for things not under her control and for things that were.

“If you don’t I’m afraid your stubbornness will win over what you’re heart really wants. You deserve happiness and Hermione can give that to you and more if you would only let her.”

Harry’s jaw firmed in stubborn resolve. “She said I wasn’t worth waiting for.”

“She did not.”

“She as good as,” Harry insisted.

“Yes, and I say the moon is made of cheese. You can’t honestly believe she meant it.”

Harry glared. “Well--”

Luna returned to her dreamy state. “I’m glad you agree, Harry.”

“Why do you do that?” Harry demanded suddenly. “I know you can act normally, why do you go all dreamy-eyed?”

Luna looked at him with a queer smile. “Dreams are lovely things.”

“Oh, that explains everything,” Harry grouched, crossing his arms over his chest.

“It does, doesn’t it?” Luna murmured, unfazed by his posturing and stood up. “Flitwick wants to see you; you should come up to the castle.”

“Not a chance. I don’t want a run in with Dumbledore. I’m not joining the Order so he can keep an eye on me while figuring out in his twisted lemon drop deficient mind if my actions prove me a good guy or a bad guy.”

“Dumbledore is in the hospital wing. He’s being supervised by Madam Pomfrey. He won’t be getting out of bed for a while.”

“Really?” Harry asked, astounded.

“Mmm-hmm. Plover got him. He’s having trouble breathing. Some sort of asphyxiation curse gone awry. Lucky for Dumbledore or he’d be dead.”

Subdued, Harry opened the secret passageway and followed Luna down . His snakes followed behind him, lining in the edges of the corridor. Harry shut the door and left his wand purposefully dark, when light flared from the tip of Luna’s.

Harry threw up an arm, blocking the sudden brightness. “What about the garhoulees?”

“Oh, they’re hibernating,” Luna replied sweetly. “They said light wouldn’t bother them. You can light your wand.”

Harry flicked his wand quietly and the empty sconces aligning the walls flared to life. Luna turned off her wand and began walking, humming quietly to herself. The walk to the castle was long but Luna filled the journey with idle chatter, unconcerned that Harry didn’t offer much to the conversation. He was after all going back to Hogwarts.

Was his father still petrified? Was his mother speaking to people again? What were his ‘uncles’ doing? What was happening with Daniel? And the school populace’s opinion--had it changed? What about the other professors, where they still firmly in Dumbledore’s camp of suspicions and ignorance or was Flitwick making him allies? And--

He shook his head, clearing away his rambling thoughts. He would only know the answers when he got there because Hermione had been his link inside the castle and since dropping all lines of

communication with her he was cut adrift from the wizarding world. Everything he knew was centered around Horcruxes and Voldemort and trying to stay one step ahead--which from his point of view was barely working because Voldemort kept showing up wherever he went. Luckily he had always managed to escape so far... but for how long would his luck last?

That was the trick, Harry decided following Luna around the last dip and bend in the tunnel. Natural light filtered in through the opening under the Whomping Willow. Shadows danced along the walls, ceiling and floor.

"I hate that thing," Harry grouched, bending down to pick up a fallen stick. Stick being the operative word when it was still struggling, trying to put up a fight; a snapped limb of the tree in question.

"Aye," Luna agreed with a cross expression. "It kills the whumplings that try to live in its shade. Horrid tree, its surly behavior is almost as bad as Professor Snape's."

Surprised, Harry laughed. "Why Luna, that I believe is the first negative thing I've heard you say."

"About the tree or Snape? Because if you listen you'll find I speak bad about Snape a lot. You just have to pay attention. Here we are!" she sang.

Harry prodded the base of a knot on the inside of the tree where Luna pointed and the tree stilled, even the struggling limb in his hand. Creeped out, Harry dropped it and followed Luna out through the hole. She sighed happily when they reached the sunlight.

Hogwarts weather charms were in full force, even with the balmiest of spring days they still should have been inclined to wear a warm jumper, but the charms retained the ground's temperature longer and they were reasonably warm. Harry followed Luna across the grounds to the entrance courtyard and into the Great Hall.

The few students milling around gasped at the sight of him and started whispering heatedly to each other. Luna leaned into Harry and said under her breath, "Don't pay them any mind, you're the new

celebrity. They're merely curious about you, at last. It's about time that charm of yours was wearing down."

She frowned looking at him harder. "Though it seems you're maintaining it even more fiercely. No matter. Let's go find Flitwick."

Harry cocked an eyebrow at her. "You keep mentioning this charm."

"Curse really."

"Curse, then. What are you talking about?"

Luna shrugged. "Haven't got the foggiest."

Harry gave an exasperated sigh. "Fine, lead on."

Luna and Harry crossed to the stairwell and began climbing, changing their path as the staircases moved. They cut behind the portrait of Felix Summerbee using the password, "Cheerfully Cheerful," on the third floor by the Charms classroom to get to Flitwick's office on the seventh floor. They appeared in the hallway midway between his office and the entrance to the Ravenclaw common room.

Knocking on Flitwick's door, Harry stuck his hands into his pockets and scuffed his toe against the ground. Luna smiled serenely and knocked again a little harder when he didn't answer.

"He's working with sonorous charms and blasting charms. He has to keep earmuffs on the whole time. I think Professor Sprout gave him the pink ones from Herbology that nobody ever wants to wear."

"Has he tried weather charms? What about making a thunder clap? That could be real useful in battle."

"That's what he's trying to harness," Luna said, "but first he's examining the properties of the other spells using an Arithmacer's diagnostic charms and Wenlock meter."

"Well he's either not here or he's charmed the earmuffs with more protections than what he adds when fixing them up for Mandagora's."

"If you can reverse his locking charms be my guess," Luna invited.

Harry smirked and rolled up his sleeves. "Piece of cake."

"More like a pumpkin pie."

"Whichever," Harry agreed easily and started to pick apart the wards surrounding the Charms professor's office.

All of the wards were meant to keep mischief makers out of the office. There was one that if someone desperately needed him, especially one of his Eagles, that it would alert him in the staff room, his private quarters, inside the office, and open the door immediately. Too bad they weren't hurt or in danger, Harry left that ward intact and picked apart a ward that was so ingenious he was sure his prankster Uncle Sirius would sell the family mansion to learn it and then employ it on Snape. It wasn't painful, but it was humiliating.

At last the lock wards and charms were removed as well as the prankster punishment ward. Harry opened the door and bowed Luna into the room. She laughed at his antics and followed inside, where Professor Flitwick had indeed been. They watched the absorbed wizard poke at the dials on the Wenlock meter and jot down a few notes.

Harry tapped him on his shoulder and Flitwick shrieked in surprise. Harry smirked and Luna grinned at their Professor's reaction. Flitwick tried to glower at them, but found it useless in squashing their impish glimmers. He took off his earmuffs.

"Hello Harry," Flitwick said, indicating him to sit down. "Luna if you don't mind."

"Not at all Professor. I'll see you later Harry," she said turning and leaving the office.

Flitwick examined what was left of his charms and wards in dismay. "That'll take two weeks to repair. How did you get it down so quickly? I should have heard an alert."

Harry pointed to the corner where a silencing charm had been dropped. "Though I honestly didn't think it would matter because you didn't hear us knocking."

Flitwick looked a little sheepish. "Yes, well, aha... I wanted you here today Harry because a few other professors wished to help you with your independent studies."

"Who?"

"Professor Snape for one."

"Snape?" Harry asked dubiously. "He's about as likely to want to help me as he is to wash his greasy hair."

"Is that what you think?" the wizard in question asked silkily stepping through the doorway.

"I'm a Potter," Harry reminded.

"Your brother said your father would be disowning you when he woke up."

"Ah," Harry replied. "So now that I'm the black sheep of the family... or more of one, you suddenly want to lend your esteemed services."

"Anything to hurt Potter," Snape agreed, not hiding his reasons.

"So you don't like me," Harry stated.

"Hardly."

"Good," Harry responded. "I wouldn't have believed you if you said you did."

Flitwick rolled his eyes. "Moving along."

"Filius tells me that he gives you Outstandings on all of your potion work."

"You would too if you weren't such a tight ass."

Snape glared at Harry. "Your skills in the art of potion making are dubious."

Harry smirked at the challenging tone. "You've had me for six and a half years. I get marked down only when I try to better a potion and since I try to always better the potion and change the instructions to make the potion more efficient I barely scrape Acceptables."

"You could blow yourself up--" Snape justified coldly.

"So you say," Harry interrupted casually. "But if you ever took a look at my notebooks you'd see I know more about the properties of ingredients and the mechanics of potion making than most Healers. A year of work coupled with a revolutionary potion I could easily beat you as the youngest wizard to receive his Potions Mastery. You're angry I'm not a Slytherin and angry that I was born a Potter or you'd have tried to mentor me long ago."

"Touché, Harry," sneered Snape.

"We don't like each other and that's fine. But if I let you tutor me you're going to be a help and not a hindrance or I will continue on my own with Flitwick overseeing my grades."

Snape stared coolly at him. Harry held his gaze, keeping his Occlumency shields up. He felt a tickle of wind against his neck and smiled devilishly.

"And you won't try to steal into my mind either."

"I'm surprised," Snape replied, recalling his probe.

Flitwick teetered on the balls of his feet. "You two behave like children."

Snape stared at Flitwick and merely flashed some teeth. "Merely setting up the boundaries of Mentor and Student."

"Sure," Flitwick said, winking broadly at Harry. Harry grinned back.

“Be sure to see me in my office twice a week. Never on weekends and never on Wednesdays. I administer all my detentions on those days.”

“Were I to show up, you’d surely set me to work mindlessly cleaning out cauldrons with my tongue,” Harry supplied.

“Goodbye Filius.”

“Severus.”

When Snape left Harry flicked the door closed with a casual wave of his finger. The use of soundless wandless magic no longer surprised Flitwick. His curiosity had Harry perform on previous occasions several differently powered spells on demand. Intrigued, Flitwick, Harry guessed, probably took more notes on Harry’s magic than on the dozens of notebooks dedicated to the sound charms scattered over every surface.

“Who else did you say wanted to tutor me?” Harry asked curiously, taking a seat even as Flitwick moved to do the same.

“Aha... well you see, Professors Vector, Babbling, and McGonagall.”

“No.”

“No?”

“I won’t be tutored by McGonagall,” Harry replied. “For six years she’s been the fair teacher, the stickler for equality and friendship. Suddenly her little Lions are in trouble and she’s worse than Snape. Snape’s been upfront since he started here, dishonest and cruel. I know what to expect. McGonagall is a wild card and she’s liked me less than Snape, if that’s possible. No.”

“As you wish,” Flitwick acquiesced. “Her behavior is aha... most troubling.”

Harry shrugged. “No more than Dumbledore’s waffling indecisions when it comes to me. I’m Order material one day and Voldemort’s lackey the next.”

"He's been hospitalized," Flitwick mentioned.

"So I heard."

"He also wants to see you."

Harry glared. "No."

Flitwick shook his head. "You know no is not an option, Harry."

Harry grumbled, "I figured you'd say that. I won't see him today, but I'll come back tomorrow. I have things to do today."

"As you wish, Harry," Flitwick replied as Harry stood to leave. "Your punishment for breaking my wards is to make me new ones."

"Crafty bastard," Harry grumbled.

Flitwick laughed.

--

§Tell me why I'm doing this again?§ Harry groused to his advisors as they slithered along beside him.

§Because, Milord, you do not want giants in Hogsmeade,§ replied the python sensibly.

Harry looked at Oorjit. §I concur, sire. That is a complication you do not want.§

§This is ridiculous though. An errand of futility. Giant dynasties rise and fall like the wind. Insubstantial and unmemorable until a fierce howling storm marks them. Then it's just messy. If I should gain the current Gurg's favor who is to say I will have it of the next or the next?§

§Milord,§ Aston the ashwinder said patiently. §Despite the severe setbacks under the alliance with Voldemort decades ago, they are still creatures to be reckoned with. Alligning with their Gurgs will help our fight against Voldemort. There is only so much a snake can do.§

§You mean a fire-snake, I can do much, I assure you my liege,§ the self-important anaconda murmured.

§But why are we climbing a mountain?§ Harry grumbled, massaging his right calf muscle. §Why not jump into their midst?§

§Because they would kill you instantly?§ Oorjit suggested dryly.

§Ah,§ Harry replied. §I knew there was a good reason; got to stay alive to meet Dumbledore tomorrow. Lead on.§

°«««°»»°End Chapter 43°«««°»»°

Chapter 44

Dumbledore coughed gruffly into a handkerchief, dabbing at his large red nose when he was through. At Harry's arrival he immediately stuffed it back into his robes and beckoned for Harry to join him. Reluctantly Harry moved forward, not needing the knowing little jab from behind as Professor Flitwick crossed the threshold.

"Harry," Dumbledore called cheerfully.

Suspicious, Harry narrowed his gaze. "I could keep respectfully quiet or copy Snape and be stoic but I think we're beyond that. What do you want and speak plainly or I'll turn right around and leave, Flitwick or no Flitwick."

"Ah," he said sadly, coughing roughly. "So that is where we stand."

Harry stood by passively, not amused. "Voldemort got you then?"

"Failed to get me," Dumbledore corrected.

"Well he clipped you good for not getting you. Luna tells me it was an asphyxiation curse cast improperly."

"No, it was cast properly."

Harry blinked. "Oh?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Voldemort, who fears death, botched the spell on purpose. I will die of it that is for certain. He wants me to see my death approaching and fear it like he does. It's his way of making me fallible. Healer Pomfrey is doing all in her considerable powers to detain the evitable. But I won't fear my death, so his plan failed."

"Not if it kills you," Harry reminded. "With you dead the war will not be contained in Britain. Part of the reason you were elected to Chief Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizardry was to prevent another wizard war from escaping the boundaries of its origins. It wouldn't do for Voldemort to unite his British forces with the remaining Germans and Russians leftover from the last war."

“That would be bad indeed,” Dumbledore agreed, his eyes twinkling. “I’ve been grooming Daniel to take over my position. I just didn’t think he’d have to do that for a few more decades.”

Harry let out a bark of laughter. “Daniel? Contain Voldemort? About as likely as him defeating the half-blood bastard. You still think he’s the Boy-Who-Lived even after his confession?”

“No,” Dumbledore replied. “I don’t. Professor Snape used Veritaserum to confirm all that he said.”

“Something you should have done ages ago,” Harry reminded.

Dumbledore nodded weakly, coughing loudly into his handkerchief. “You’re right of course, Harry. I fear I am too late in correcting my mistakes.”

“Yeah, one misspoken sentence from you and I’ve lived my entire childhood shunned by my parents, hated by my brother, treated like a leper by my peers in school, and all but ignored by my professors, and completely looked over by everybody else. I would say you couldn’t fix anything even if you tried.”

“It’s never too late, Harry,” Dumbledore replied.

“Oh?” Harry scoffed. “I can see that by calling me Harry you realize my father is disowning me. I am no longer a Potter; I am not longer a Hogwarts student. I am not a lot of things.”

Dumbledore laid his head back against the pillows. “You hate me Harry, I see that, but there are things we must discuss. Private things.”

“Voldemort related things?” Harry supplied, sparing a glance at Flitwick. “No thanks. I know more and have done more than you could possibly comprehend and as for fighting against him?” Harry shrugged. “Flitwick is training me in my dueling. It’s helping even if it doesn’t look like it. I’ve been beaten more oft in training than against Voldemort. I just work better on my feet in the midst of a duel. No planning, if you know what I mean. I think it’s the adrenaline buzz.”

"I could also help you," Dumbledore offered.

"What for?" Harry asked, and then more plainly. "How? You're laid out, there's no way you could put up a decent fight now. Unless you've been hiding a deep hereto unheard of well of wordless talent and even then it would have to be wandless so you wouldn't over exert yourself. I win by running circles around you."

"There's always transfiguration for dueling and N.E.W.T.S."

Harry shook his head. "It won't work. I don't trust you or your motives. Why help me now--except of course that Daniel confessed making all his exploits my own and thus for giving you even greater hope at defeating Voldemort. I wouldn't do it except I foiled Tom on such a deeply personal level that he's coming after me with a vengeance. I've met with him in person three times since dropping school. If he didn't have it out for me before, killing his familiar certainly did it."

"You killed Nagini?" Dumbledore asked hopefully, rising up off the pillows.

Harry raised an eyebrow. "If I said I did it, then I did it. In fact my own familiar ate her."

"A snake?" Dumbledore asked faintly.

"A magical snake," Harry confirmed. "An occamy to be precise. I speak Parseltongue remember? This shouldn't be so surprising."

"Still Filius has told me about your studies and the work ethic you put into them. I can grant you access to Hogwarts library and potion labs."

"I will take you up on a permanent all-access library pass," Harry replied with a wry twist of lips. "This doesn't make us friends and you certainly won't be welcome to any trips to the library that I do make."

"Isn't there some way that you could trust me?"

Harry stared hard at Dumbledore. "Why did you make such a rash declaration that Daniel was the Boy-Who-Lived? Why did you

proceed to ignore me ever since that day? And why did you feel it necessary to tell the professors I was a bad egg from the get-go?"

When Dumbledore didn't answer Harry sneered. "That's what I thought. Thanks for the use of the castle's library, I must be going. Lessons and all. Can't have Snape riding my arse even more than he already is. Twelve feet of parchment on the differences between my improved potion and the original; for every potion I've tampered with! Greasy git."

Harry spun around ignoring a flustered Dumbledore and headed for Flitwick when a hesitant voice called out his name. Harry stumbled and immediately cursed himself for his reaction. Despite talking with Luna he wasn't prepared to see her again. Slowly, however, he turned and faced her.

"Hermione," he greeted stiffly.

Her eyes were red-rimmed and puffy as if she'd been crying recently. She had appeared from behind the door to Madam Pomfrey's office. She stood there clutching at the doorjamb for support, lightly swaying on her feet. He frowned at her appearance, instantly worried and concerned.

"I'm sorry!" she blurted, her frizzy hair trembling violently. "I didn't mean it! I swear!"

Harry glanced at Flitwick and Dumbledore, more than ever aware of their presence as they watched silently. "I know," he finally said. "Luna made me see--"

"Luna!" Hermione wailed, hiccupping violently as she gulped in air.

"Yes, Luna," Harry reiterated. "She made me see things clearer."

She trembled and bristled and deflated all in a matter of seconds. "I might have known."

Harry shook his head. "She's a good friend," he reminded, adding, "for both of us."

Hermione looked miserable but nodded.

"I still need time."

Hermione's eyes glistened. "How much?"

Uncomfortable Harry shuffled his feet. "However much it takes."

"Try not to take too long," she begged. "I can't stand it."

"I know," Harry said wretchedly, wishing he could trust the love she offered in her gaze. "I can't stand it either."

But he didn't cross the room and sweep her into his arms. He didn't end the pain for both of them, instead he exited the infirmary feeling like a two-ton hippogriff had slammed into his ribcage and left him short of breath.

--

Oorjit broke through Harry's mental athletics with his basilisk form late in the evening. Opening his eyes Harry glanced down imperiously and waited for the occamy to explain the interruption. Oorjit averted his eyes and bowed, hankering low to the floor. Not particularly hard for the snake-bird to do but it was always a good move when Harry came from a session with his basilisk form. The King was always more present and Harry's easygoing affability less so under the domineering mindset.

§Well?§ Harry drawled, annoyed.

§Milord, there are some night walkers here to see you.§

Harry looked intrigued, his green eyes flashing. §Vampires?§

§Yes, Milord.§

§Very well, send them in,§ Harry said, lounging backwards onto a throne that hadn't been there a moment ago.

A few moments later a couple of fresh newbies and an old master shuffled through the doorway into the transformed greeting room. The

old master vampire took in a single appraising glance of Harry's attire, which along with the room had drastically changed into something far more in the realm of a king's grandeur while still being subdued and not overly pompous.

"My Lord," the vampire began respectfully. "On behalf of Persephone's Night Walkers welcome. Welcome at last to our ranks."

"You are a little late to be welcoming me. I met with the centaurs a month ago."

The master glowered. "Respectfully my lord, they were a good deal closer and could travel by day or night while our contingent was restricted severely."

"Ah, yes," Harry agreed. With a showy wave of his hand he conjured the vampire a cushiony seat, leaving the minions to stand by uncertainly. "Many thanks for your gracious welcome. Now, what news does your council bring?"

"My mistress has an overture for you."

Harry raised an eyebrow and waved commandingly. "Indeed. Shall I hear it or will I be offended at the paltry offer she wishes to bestow?"

"Persephone would never think so lowly of you, Serpent King, to offer such disrespect."

"Good," Harry nodded. "What is the offer?"

"In an offer of goodwill she is willing to tell you, my lord, of the prophecy of the King of Serpents told by our vampire seer Cassidy. Then for the allegiance between you and her, she offers herself and her vampires to further your cause against the Great Usurper for the price of throwing your impressive political weight behind some new vampire statures."

Harry pondered for a minute. "Generous. Does your mistress expect my support before or after I've received hers?"

"Both, my lord," the vampire answered readily. "If perhaps the statues push forward faster than we dare hope, then sooner. Otherwise, after. For now she's secure in the knowledge that when you speak you don't renege on your promises."

Harry gestured Oorjit forward. §Usually snakes and vampires are enemies, though not to such a degree as the spiders. What say you on the matter?§

Oorjit surprised, bowed low. §With respect, your majesty, I should not have such say in these matters.§

§Nonetheless, I respect your opinion. Share it with me.§

Oorjit paused in thought. §On the surface it seems like a perfect offer. Below that I am certain more is being offered than we know. I do not know of Persephone, or of her will or disposition. She is not active where I was captured and I haven't heard of her here in Britain.§

§So she is paltry?§

§Not, necessarily,§ Oorjit hedged. §Just unheard of until now. She may be quite renown in the vampire culture. She might have come out of the woodwork because of Voldemort's actions. She might agree with them. She might not. We know nothing of her, but allies are scarce.§

"Tell me of this prophecy of which you speak," Harry demanded, switching tongues.

The master inclined his head. "The Prophecy of the Serpent King was thought to have come true many moons ago when Voldemort first rose to power. Now, knowing what you are, having felt you come to life in Germany, the most of the vampires know better. It is said that aligning ourselves with the Serpent King will bring us great tidings. It is hoped at least. Cassidy, our seer, has proclaimed that The Serpent King will rise up from the wizards infusing his dying realm with great power and prosperity. Times though will not all be easy for the Serpent King will face the Great Usurper--fate rests in the final battle on how destiny will turn. All in a blink of an eye."

Harry sat back. "You have given me much thought. Tell your mistress, this tidings of goodwill was happily and gratefully received. Upon my word, she will have my answer in a week. I will send a snake to her if the answer is no and two snakes if the answer is yes. Where shall I send my servants?"

"She will be in resting in London. Many to feast on there for our Kiss."

Harry stood and the vampire copied him. "Good. Good." Harry said, shaking the vampire's hand. "Now if you'll be so kind, my hours are not the same as yours and I must retire."

--

At the end of the week Harry sent two snakes to Persephone. They traveled down by the Knight Bus, one momentarily transfigured to look humanoid if one didn't look too close. Draping garments completed the disguise and as long as his servant didn't speak to Stan Shunpike should get safely to London with the other wrapped up beneath the cloak. Hedwig would find them the next day and fly them back. Not that his familiar or the snakes were happy with that part of the plan but it was expedient and Harry willed it so.

After that meeting, Harry took to wearing the Gryffindor garter all the time. It made him grumpy and surly, as if the soul inside was leaking into his personality. Luna assured him it was because he'd been Hermioneless for so long that his soul was starting to grow ill tempered and surly without hers nearby to brush up against. Harry was starting to believe she was right.

The last plover piece as he was beginning to refer to the fragments of Voldemort's soul trapped inside inanimate objects was nowhere to be found. Even if he had figured it out, Harry wasn't sure he wanted to go and retrieve it. Having the garter around was more than enough.

His agitation flowed over to his lessons. Snape was a downright bastard, taking every opportunity to be a foul git. He knew it would happen, the man was simply too enamored with himself and his own childhood traumas to grow up. Harry had endured it with gritted teeth until he had exploded on poor Professor Flitwick during a dueling

session. Flitwick was still recovering in the hospital wing from spell damage. Harry felt like a heel.

Even his snakes were getting worst from him than their fair share. Oorjit had stopped talking to him and if Hedwig hadn't been so sadistically delighted by that fact she would be snubbing Harry too for his ill treatment of her these past two weeks. In short, Harry's miserable behavior was getting to everyone except Luna, even mild mannered Professor Babbling.

It didn't help Harry that in those two weeks Voldemort had been on a rampage. Two assassin snakes were caught, captured, and converted to see the truth of their true Lord and Master and sent back to Voldemort. The Dark Lord was sure to hate his presents and would probably kill them. Harry barely felt a twinge of his conscious at the idea.

St. Mungo's had been attacked and Neville Longbottoms' parents were kidnapped. Vampires were hunting in the open again. It was like the Dark Ages all over again. Werewolves snuck in and attacked Hogsmeade on the full moon six days ago. Several were bitten, including one child. Harry blamed himself for the young boy's condition. He should have stopped them, but he'd been asleep unawares. Giants were clobbering Blackpool, Exeter, and Norwich for purposes Harry couldn't fathom. Teams of Aurors were tasked with trying to subdue the large menaces and with obliterating the general populace--focusing heavily on muggle news crews.

Even with a fully equipped Obliviation team working around the clock the muggles were getting suspicious. Muggle attacks were rising. The London Underground had been hit by a Death Eater raid. Bridges were being knocked out, causing several deaths. Dementors were running amok, several hundred killed already and the numbers were rising.

Voldemort was back in full force and the attack on the Somerset coastline was nothing compared to what he was doing now. Basilbury and Liverford were lucky to have been hit when Voldemort was only mildly motivated. Since Harry's little duel with the wanker the Dark

Lord had motivation in spades. Harry was trying to focus on his training, but being in Britain made that hard.

He could hear people in Hogsmeade pointing and talking with their neighbors. He could read the papers; the *Daily Prophet*, *Nothumberland Soothsayer*, *Centaur Vision*, the *Weekly Mirror*, *Hogsmeade Observer* and the *Evening Oracle*. He was getting harsh reviews everywhere he went. Magazines like the *Quibbler* were more understanding though several of them including *Witch Weekly* questioned his Boy-Who-Lived status and declared him the anti-hero.

It made him mad. How could they honestly expect him to want to save their wretched little lives when they first ignored him and then badmouthed him second? Were they all that delusional? Did they really think he was going to drop everything for them? Apparently they were, he thought with disgust tossing down another rubbish paper into the fire.

He ran his hand over his eyes and sighed, contemplating taking off the garter just so he could have a break from the malevolent spirit inside. Just as he was reaching for it, Hedwig burst through the open window in a splash of white feathers. Harry caught her as she crashed headlong into him, knocking him back several feet.

"Hedwig!" he cried, fighting with her to straighten out her limbs and feathers.

She hooted urgently and squabbled at his fingers, nipping and biting until he was cursing her a blue streak.

"Hold still will you! I'll get the damn letter off!"

Her talons gripped tighter into his wrist, drawing blood. Harry winced and glowered as he pulled the letter off, snapping the string that had hastily tied it. Hedwig hopped up to his shoulder and started tugging on his hair. He swatted absently at her as he opened the letter.

Dread filled his stomach at the words written in Dumbledore's handwriting. Dropping the letter Harry hit the secret passageway at a dead run, barking orders at Oorjit and the others as he hurried down

the narrow steps. Oorjit caught up with him and they raced to Hogwarts.

“What’s happening?” Oorjit demanded as he navigated the narrow corridor and low ceilings.

“Hermione’s in trouble!” Harry shouted tersely, whipping out his wand and casting an enlargement charm on the passageway. The power of the spell staggered him but Harry quickly straightened and ran forward at a break neck speed.

“How?”

“Dumbledore thinks his family mirror was a Horcrux, unbeknownst to him. Hermione was examining it for an extra credit project and then when she didn’t show up for meals at the Great Hall for two days, he got worried.”

“You mean she’s been trapped by a Horcrux for two days already?”

“Yes!” Harry growled. “We have to hurry! There’s no time to spare. After the locket she has to be more vulnerable to him. I can’t risk losing her.”

Oorjit wheezed, dragging in rapid breaths as he and Harry hurtled to a stop. Harry quickly grabbed the fallen limb and struck the knot stopping the Whomping Willow’s angry movements. They hurried outside and sprinted up the lawn. Dumbledore was there at the entrance and beckoned them inside as Harry leapt up the stairs.

“Where is she?” he growled, walking briskly beside Dumbledore. “What happened?”

“Hermione’s down here,” Dumbledore said calmly, indicating the lower floors.

Harry ran down the steps bursting into the corridor for the dungeons, forced to wait impatiently as Dumbledore eased his way down the stairs, pausing to gasp for breath several times. Irritated at the delay, Harry waved his wand and floated Dumbledore down the rest of the way.

“Which door?”

“Third on the left--there’s something you should know about the mirror.”

Harry stopped outside the door, Oorjit ran into him.

“The mirror belonged to Rowena Ravenclaw herself. She did the charm work on it herself. The mirror is--”

“Invaluable, don’t break it,” Harry finished, twisting the door open and stepping inside.

Two mirrors stood side by side, both magnificent, both as tall as a classroom ceiling. One stood on two clawed feet with an inscription carved around the top. Harry glanced at the mirror writing and inverted the text in his head; “I show not your face but your heart's desire.” The other one hung inside an intricate oval frame. The mirror writing there read, “I show not your face but the absolute truth of yourself.” Hermione was nowhere to be seen.

Dumbledore entered and waved vaguely. “I looked in the one on the left, hoping to find her and it showed me the mirror on the right. I had no idea the Mirror of Felsrenni was a Horcrux. I don’t see how it is possible. Voldemort never had access to it, not even when he visited the castle for a job all those years ago. I thought then he was after the Hat or the Sword of Gryffindor.”

“Not your family heirlooms?” Harry returned archly. He stepped toward the second mirror and examined it.

A wave of anxious energy emanated from it and Harry knew it was a Horcrux. Touching it, he felt a double zing. One from the mirror and the other from the garter wrapped around his thigh. He flattened his palm on the wood and studied his reflection.

He felt silly staring at his reflection when nothing happened. His hair was black with the exception of his red stripe, and his eyes were green, standing out starkly in the dimness of the room. He searched in his reflection the truth.

Rowena had created this mirror to tell the viewer the pure unadulterated truth of themselves. Harry had no clue on how it worked. He supposed Hermione had been trying to deduce the process which was more subtle than Erised. He glanced back at Dumbledore.

"Leave us," he demanded. "I'll save her."

Dumbledore looked like he was going to stop him but coughed loudly. "I'll wait outside," he managed between coughs and stepped back over the threshold.

Harry turned back to the mirror. This was the final Horcrux, and Hermione was trapped inside it. How was he going to get to her? He didn't even know how it worked. Then he remembered something Luna said in the last two weeks, "When you're unsure look hard into the face of truth."

It had made no sense then. Nothing Luna said ever made sense until it suddenly did. The second to last of his Herculean efforts to stop the madness of his life and to gain some peace was in breaking the curse on this mirror. What peace he could find after all the madness he didn't know, but he wanted Hermione. Needed her. It was time to tell her that and to do so he'd find the way to save her.

For how long Harry stood there trapped in his own reminiscing, he did not know. But suddenly a flash of red caught his attention. In the dim dark room that glowed more purple than any other color it was startling. Harry stared hard at the mirror's surface and took a fortifying breath.

Look at me...

Harry looked up at the mirror, obeying the command, his body tensing, knowing the fight was about to begin. Oorjit, who sat curled in a corner, lifted his head, as if he too heard the voice.

It whispered around the edges of Harry's thoughts... coming nearer to the surface.

You're looking for the king...

Harry saw the flash of red again. It came from his eyes in the mirror. He gripped his wand tighter and widened his stance. This was it... Voldemort was flashing across the surface, rippling its contours.

That would be me...

"In your dreams," Harry scoffed, feeling the scales of his form shift to the surface, gleaming distinctly in the dim light.

No... it is me, Daniel...

The red patch of hair in his reflection disappeared. The emerald eyes mocked him as the all too familiar smirk of his brother appeared on his reflection.

I am the king and you know it Harry...

"You're wrong!"

Am I? You don't really object to me being king... you object to being found inadequate... again...

"The only one inadequate here is you," Harry sneered, no longer caring if he was speaking with his brother or Voldemort inside the mirror.

After all I am the twin the world loves... even now after you've destroyed my reputation they're hungering after me, not you... they want a real hero...

Harry scoffed. "You? A hero? Not bloody likely. You were the worst of pretenders."

But I pandered to the press... I gave them the stories they hungered for of glory and immortality and defying the greatest of enemies... to them I was every bit the hero I said I was... I still am because you hide... they're starting to wonder... they're starting to itch...

"They've got two hands, they can scratch themselves. They don't need me to do it and anyone foolish enough to listen to your lies after

all that has happened is a sheep and a lickspittle, hardly a threat to my ego.”

And what an ego... to throw away the only thing you love...

The voice echoed contemptuously in Harry’s ears.

All because of little old me. What were you afraid of? That she would find me the better choice after all?

“Stop it,” Harry growled, flicking his wand sending a glass cutter to the mirror. It bounced off the surface as if it were made out of rubber.

Because I am, brother... I am the better choice. I am KING!

“Like hell you are. She never even looked at you before. You couldn’t charm her without Voldemort’s help. So who’s the bigger loser?”

And what about all those times when she went off with me before the Horcrux came to her possession. Surely you don’t think I forced her then do you?

“That was patrol duty, nothing more.”

You don’t sound sure there brother. Have I got you looking back? My, my, we are feeling inferior now aren’t we?

“Lies!” Harry shouted, throwing a smashing hex at the surface.

The red eyes flickered in amusement on the other side. His mouth opened and spoke hatefully the things he did not wish to hear.

Then of course there was all those strange little gatherings between her and Dumbledore. He put her on the idea of dating you, spinning it so it felt like Headgirl duties. She was feeding him information on you, that’s how he kept tabs on everything you were doing. She didn’t have a secret when it came to you. Sang like a canary she did...

Harry stared hard at the reflection, unwanted images flying up in his mind’s eye. All those strange little tête-à-têtes, all the hemming and

side stepping. Against his better judgment he started to believe, feeling hurt and betrayed all over again.

§My Lord,§ Oorjit called out hesitantly uncoiling and slithering closer.
§My Lord, calm yourself. Your eyes are flashing red.§

Harry breathed threw his nose deeply, staring coldly at his reflection.
“I am sure it is all a coincidence.”

So serious... my, my aren't we full of false convictions.

“Stop these games Voldemort, or should I say Tom?”

Don't you dare presume to call me by my filthy muggle father's name.

“Oh dear,” Harry simpered. “It seems I've hit a nerve.”

Tom Riddle was nothing and in the end I made sure he stayed that way. You... you are nothing as well and I will see that you too stay that way.

The red eyes in Harry's reflection jumped forward. Unprepared for the soul's leap from its protective shell, Harry didn't counteract. Unspeakable agony erupted through Harry as the seventh of Voldemort's soul entered him. Fiery red heat seared his vision. Harry screamed.

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 44°«««°»»»°

Chapter 45

Sinister laughter bounced around his skull, scorching him where it fell. Harry doubled over, groaning at the torturous sounds.

Give up, whelp. You can't flex your muscles now. I AM KING. I rule supreme, here inside your body, inside your mind. You have no power here.

"NEVER!" Harry bellowed, his voice shaking the ceiling ominously.

Oorjit flapped frantically around his head, watching helplessly, dread deep within him. He had seen the flash of red as the Dark Lord's soul fragment leapt from the mirror into his King. Never had he felt more miserable, for there was nothing Oorjit could do to help. The fight was beyond him, taking place in every flash of those red ominous eyes inside Harry's skull.

§What can I do, Master?§ Oorjit shouted down. §Tell me, Harry!§ he pleaded as Harry twisted and twined like a snake in human form on the floor.

"You are the one who is nothing!" Harry vowed fiercely, his body lengthening, thickening.

Oorjit flew to the rafters, getting out of the way of his rapidly transforming Harry. Even coiled tightly, eighty feet of basilisk would not fit in this dungeon. The dank ceiling was his only chance of survival.

§Crack the mirror, Oorjit!§ Harry hissed forcefully, air whizzing through the remnants of his teeth. He was twenty feet tall now and still growing.

Oorjit looked down at the small room and hissed, §You're in the way. The room is too small! You'll crush me!§

§OORJIT!§

Oorjit nodded in defeat and dove without a thought through the rapidly dwindling space as Harry's coils filled every corner in the room

and still he grew. Harry felt his sides rub against the walls and suddenly the castle groaned. Long low cracks broke the stone walls, starting from where the pressure of Harry's coils broke them. The cracking continued ominously as it radiated out in all directions.

The ceiling shook and when Harry's head crashed into it, broke apart. Large stone slabs shook loose landing on Harry's massive form. The throbbing pain was forgotten under the onslaught of the raging migraine developing inside his skull.

You can not hold me out forever, Voldemort cackled ruthlessly. Soon your defenses will crumble and I will be King of Serpents. All will fear me and hate you. They will see just how mighty their pathetic hero is when I use your image to do my work.

He was Harry, King of Serpents, the guardian of all the world's belly crawlers, and no one was as good and as strong as he. Only he was deserving of the title and to prove it the unworthy one would die. The violence in Harry blossomed as he came in contact fully with his basilisk mind.

The basilisk in Harry thwamped eagerly, confidently, against the walls. Several fresh cracks rippled through the stone and debris began to break free. The rubble that hit Harry bounced off harmlessly once more. An inhuman roar rippled through Harry's throat as he cackled in triumph. Nothing could hurt him.

Temporarily the voice was silenced as the basilisk mind ran right over Voldemort's presence. A quick debate and Harry let his basilisk mind slide back, shifting patiently, eagerly in the back of his thoughts and called to Oorjit.

§Where are you?§

§Here,§ came the muffled response somewhere trapped inside Harry's coils.

It was impossible to contain an eighty plus foot snake inside such a small room. Guiltily Harry struggled to wiggle some room for the compressed occamy. The stone slid roughly against his scales.

Pathetic, sneered Voldemort. *I can do so much better. Watch.*

Blinding red light shattered across Harry's vision and he thrashed around in agony at the pain that followed it. Walls tore asunder as his coils crashed through them. The basilisk in his head quickly came to the fore again only this time Voldemort was speaking to it in Parseltongue. Struggling for control, Harry hissed back reaching out mentally to connect with his form.

He wanted to rip. He wanted to kill.

But the taunting voice was just out of reach, slithering in the shadows. It had no smell. He couldn't track it. The voice would speak from everywhere at once and still not be present. This angered him. No snake was dominant to him. None could hide from his superior senses. The fact that the voice managed to so easily was infuriating.

If he could just bite, the potent venom in his fangs would prove who was the ruler. If he could find the voice he could kill it with a stare. Rip. Tear. Kill.

§Bring me the mirror,§ Harry gasped, flinging himself out of the basilisk's domineering thoughts.

He wasn't strong enough yet to meld them to his own and stay in control. They had worked on it at night but the distance between his human and inhuman thoughts could not be so easily crossed. The predator's instincts and interminability made every effort cost. Harry knew intuitively that he was fighting with his baser self when he struggled with the basilisk as he was the basilisk.

But now was not the time to struggle with his separate selfhoods. He did not have time. Hermione did not have time.

§The mirror, Oorjit! Bring me the mirror!§

§You're too late!§ Voldemort screamed gleefully in his mind. §While you so foolishly thrust away the power the basilisk brings you, I accepted it. We're melded boy... so firmly entrenched that if you kill me you'll kill your form.§

Harry checked for the presence in the back of his mind. It was absent. He panicked. §OORJIT!§

§Since you can't stay awake forever all we have to do is wait for you to sleep. And as for your little friend, he'll be dead.§

With Voldemort in control of the powerfully primitive mind of his animagus form, Harry suddenly found himself at a loss for control of his body. Voldemort shifted the huge coils, bearing them down haphazardly with so much force the world rocked beneath them. Bright glowing green eyes tracked Oorjit as he broke through the coils, struggling mightily with the Mirror of Felsrenni.

§STOP!§ Voldemort hissed through Harry's mouth, red flashing briefly through those bright green orbs.

Oorjit didn't stop. It was as if he knew his king was trapped and that the voice commanding him was the Horcrux. Voldemort lunged forever snapping at Oorjit, trying to scare him into submission. Harry fought back struggling to stop the involuntary movements. The effort worked and Voldemort barely missed the occamy. But it was close.

Come on, Harry urged, pushing hard against Voldemort's presence as he did so.

The two were once again locked in mental battle. Harry spoke rapidly to the uncaring presence looming in his mind. Voldemort laughed sinisterly when Harry's form betrayed him, not heeding the sound of his own Parseltongue.

Harry switched tactics and threw himself into the combined thoughts of Voldemort and his basilisk, melding himself seamlessly into the void. Thoughts lashed out at him but Harry held firm.

Rip. Tear. Kill.

Intruder. Kill.

Kill.

Kill! Intruder!

Kill! Imposter!

Grabbing onto the stream of thoughts Harry pushed the word imposter through to his form. Harry fought with Voldemort, slowly, surely, regaining his purchase in the mind of his basilisk. Incensed swearing echoed in Harry's conscious as Voldemort lost control.

You didn't think it would that easy to lay claim to the King, did you?
Harry thought, forcefully pushing Voldemort off, but not out.

§Oorjit! The mirror!§

§Here, Master!§ Oorjit wheezed, hovering unstably before Harry.

Harry inhaled sharply at the stupid thing he was about to do and opened his eyes. Huge green glowing orbs collided with the mirror lancing through it, shattering the glass into a million fragments. Oorjit yelped, thrown back against the wall even as Voldemort bellowed in rage as he was ripped from Harry's body without so much as an ado.

Harry started shrinking, reversing the transformation. The floor rapidly rose to meet him and he pitched forward at a run to Oorjit. Peeling the wooden frame from around the occamy Harry winced as he saw the damage.

§My poor friend,§ Harry murmured, feeling intensely grateful for the young occamy. §Stay still, I will get these shards out of you. Be calm or you'll lose lifeblood.§

Oorjit moaned pitifully as Harry used magic to remove the chunks of wood and glass from his slender body. Conjured bandages wrapped the wounds after a minor flesh knit charm was placed. Harry could only hope it worked on snakes as well as humans. One of Oorjit's wings was bent backwards from hitting the wall and knowing it would hurt he stunned the occamy. Setting the bones into place with a series of cracks and pops, Harry wrapped it too in a makeshift bandage sling.

Upon awakening Oorjit let out a high pitched scream of pain. §You stupid cuss! You're a king not a healer!§ he swore when the agony ebbed.

§Thank you,§ Harry informed Oorjit, scooping him up and tucking him against his body heat.

Oorjit let out another moan, this time more pleasure filled. Drowsily he hissed, §At your humble service, my lord.§

§Above and beyond,§ Harry murmured as the air shimmered.

Above the shattered remains of the mirror an image formed projected into space. Slowly it coalesced into a form Harry knew too well. Hermione. *Hermione*. He set Oorjit aside and elated Harry ran to her.

Gently he lowered her to the ground, hastily sweeping it of mirror shards. Cradling her in his hands, Harry used his wand to cast a full body scan. At the results his relief was almost staggering. All her vitals were high, she just seemed to be unconscious.

“Hermione,” he crooned softly, gently shaking her.

The lights flickered. Troubled Harry looked up at them before looking back around at Oorjit. The snake was staring entranced at something on the floor behind him. Harry whipped his head back around and inhaled sharply.

Clutching Hermione to him, Harry watched in trepidation as a glistening red form spilled out from the broken garter. It was blood. Harry set Hermione down and warily stood up calling his wand to his hand. There was still one last Horcrux to fight.

The blood pooled upward, fast like water falling backwards. Voldemort as he never appeared before, stepped out calmly. His bright blue eyes gazed at Harry with quiet amusement. He looked... human... muggle.

“Daniel,” he said in greeting. Harry kept quiet, obviously this version still didn’t know who he was dealing with. “I had a feeling Dumbledore would set you on the task to find the pieces of my soul.”

“I’ve found them,” Harry sneered confidently, raising his wand. “You’re the last.”

An amused smile ticked upward. Voldemort smirked at Harry. "Is that so? Not to worry, not to worry. I took precautions just for that probability as unlikely as it seemed. I wasn't going to be caught with my guard down. Not after you broke free of me in the graveyard, but no matter. No matter."

"Precautions?" Harry asked, a trickle of anxiety prickling the hairs at the back of his neck.

"Hmm--yes," Voldemort replied, tilting his head. "A few modifications, if you will, to the ritual. Would you like to see?"

"Not particularly," Harry answered. "I would like you to die."

Voldemort laughed joyously and the sound hit Harry with foreboding. It sounded so wrong. Where was the sinister hissing? The telltale red gleam of hatred? Harry shifted slightly, tensing, preparing for the expected attack.

He got it. Voldemort sprung forward, lightning quick. Harry shot off a spell he'd seen Lupin cast on Peeves in third year. It held no affect on Voldemort's soul. The mirror shard it hit however sailed backwards breaking into even more pieces against the stone wall. The tinkling noise sounded just as Voldemort's fist slammed into Harry's face.

Stumbling backwards several paces Harry waved his wand frantically casting the first spell that came to him. A distinctly dark soul spell designed to render the soul trapped fired dead on and broke against the floor with a splash. Voldemort laughed brightly, slamming his elbow into Harry's nose.

Frantic and bleeding, Harry tried to shove Voldemort off of him, but his hands passed right through Voldemort's body.

"Wha--How?" he managed just before Voldemort landed a solid jab to his solar plexus.

Doubling over, Harry received a knee to his chest and an elbow to the jaw. Blindly he fired off a ghost repelling spell. He was grasping for straws and was falling short. Voldemort slammed his heel down on

the arch of Harry's foot. Harry grunted in pain, curling up as the blows continued to rain on him.

Hauling him up by the arm, Voldemort threw Harry over his shoulder. Landing with a groan, Harry shot off three more spells across his body, watching as they uselessly splashed against the floor, the walls, and the door. Voldemort was on him again and Harry rolled out of the way. A boot smashed into the ground right where his head had been.

Scuttling backwards Harry threw spell after spell. "This is not possible!" he muttered, angry, bleeding, and scared.

Voldemort chortles. "Daniel, Daniel, Daniel. Spells won't work against me. I don't have a body and I am not a ghost, though I suppose I do haunt you. Do you have nightmares?" he asked, stalking closer.

Harry scrambled away, winded and aching. His magic was useless against Voldemort. How? How?

Oorjit called from beside Hermione, trying to appear small and insignificant. §Snake magic, Harry! Use it!§

§Harry?§ Voldemort asked, hesitating. His eyes ran along the length of him and he broke out bemused laughter.

Truly this version of Voldemort was terrible. Frightening in ways his real self could never hope to be.

§It's ickle Harryikins?§ Voldemort asked, peering more closely yet. §It is. It is ickly Harryikins. Harry how suiting. You're going to be as much a failure as your pathetic brother.§

§Destroy the impure soul!§ Harry bellowed, shaking as magic swelled in him and sprang forward hitting Voldemort in the chest.

Voldemort looked angry. §You dare call snake-magic against me? You, a squib in comparison to the mighty Dark Lord?§

§King, you wanker,§ Harry spat, blood landing on the floor. §Not squib, king.§

Voldemort's eyes narrowed menacingly. §Likely story. As king you would realize that the snake magic is not as powerful as the wizard's magic. Though it does tend to scare the followers into obedience faster than the pain curse.§

§Or,§ Harry countered, §the squib claiming greatness can not wield it.§

§I did not disappear so readily on the other hand.§

Harry contemplated that. §It is the first time it has failed me outright,§ he acknowledged.

§Interesting, you still claim it works then? Kill the snake-child!§ he screamed.

Air stirred, whipped around Harry's hair and Voldemort looked surprised, then pleased. The wind died and Harry stood there as unruffled as Voldemort had been by Harry's Parseltongue spell.

§Intriguing,§ Voldemort replied. §But hardly effective. It has limits, sadly. However, even so, we are not as shall we say at an impasse. I can still kill you with my bare hands.§

§And I can not lay a hand or spell on you,§ Harry reaffirmed. §How?§

§I rewrote the ritual. The impure wizard blood was strained out of me as I channeled this part of my soul into the garter. It is not the only thing I changed though as you noticed.§

Harry's eyes gleamed. §Die Voldemort,§ he mocked. §Destroy the dark one!§

Magic flared again and fell aside. Voldemort's irritated countenance shifted as he charged Harry again. Dismayed at the magic ineffectiveness, Harry dodge Voldemort's kick and prayed for an idea.

Harry felt the drain on his magic as Voldemort stole it from him to power his attacks. "Magica Esse!"

The shield sprung in place and Voldemort fumbled. The redness of the blood that made him creep back into his skin. Voldemort snarled. Hands outstretched he pushed through the barrier that Harry held and wrapped his hands around his neck. Harry smirked when they fell through, missing their target.

Harry cast the Scruta charm next, driving Voldemort back like he was a Siccus. The blood began to boil, bursting in little ruptures everywhere the pale skin was exposed to the air. Voldemort screamed in rage, striking at Harry only to find his strength gone.

"No! This can't be!" he roared, passing his hand through Harry's head again and again. "I changed it. You can not defeat me!"

"Want to bet?" Harry taunted. "Expecto Patronum!"

His patronus erupted from the tip of his wand attacking Voldemort viciously. Flesh tore in chunks, melting into blood as they detached themselves. Crazed, Voldemort looked around and flew across the floor, bursting into a spray of blood and gore as he dived at Oorjit and Hermione.

The pull on Harry's magic ended. He sighed in relief. "That's over," he murmured. "Now there's only Voldemort left."

§Not quite over,§ Voldemort declared in the hissing tones of the injured occamy. §Did you know, Harry that the snake-bird's venom is among the deadliest in the world?§

§His venom sacks were removed by Professor Hobday and Hagrid,§ Harry returned with deadly steel. §You won't harm anyone in that form.§

Rage flashed in Oorjit's eyes. §This is not over!§

Mournfully, Harry replied. §Yes, I'm afraid it is. Kill the snake-bird.§

As Oorjit died, Voldemort was at last made mortal. The magic had done as he commanded and Harry summoned his friend toward him. He conjured a blanket, emerald green, and wrapped the battered

occamy with it. Bereft, Harry felt the loss of his snarky protector and loyal friend. It hit him as hard as when Serion died.

Three were dead in the pursuit of ending Voldemort's reign of terror. All of them heroes because the grasp of the Dark Lord would never reach them as they were. Snakes would have been glorified. Serion-- Oorjit had chosen to die to protect him. Myrtle faced her fear of life and of death to protect him. Who would remember them?

Harry looked out at the chamber. Rocks, rubbles, and glass lay everywhere. Desolate, alone, and grieving Harry wondered not for the first time how to go on and decided he would be the one to remember them. As their king, as their champion, but most of all as their friend. The basilisk in Harry could let them go to the great grasses in peace knowing full well that death was the natural course in life. For Harry he could let them go in peace knowing he would soon be avenging them.

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 45°«««°»»»°

Chapter 46

Fear had held him for too long, he thought, slumping against the wall. Too many fears. It was time to let go of festering wounds but he was too battered to move, with the adrenaline gone every muscle hurt. Thinking hurt.

Groaning in protest he sat up and looked around at the destruction of the dungeon. A small noise turned his attention. Hermione stirred, sitting up as she came too. Harry hurried as quickly as possible to her side, setting Oorjit's body on the ground and pulled her into his arms. Surprised, she held herself stiffly before the need to hold him melted her.

Urging her closer, in spite of the pain, Harry murmured in her ear, "I don't need more time."

Startled, she tried to pull back but Harry held her tight. "Harry?" she whispered, afraid.

"I know what I want," he insisted, pulling back slightly to stare deep into her eyes. "What I want is you."

"Oh, Harry," she moaned softly. "Please tell me this is not a dream."

"It's not a dream, Hermione," Harry assured her, pushing back a strand of loose hair. "We have to talk, but this is not a dream."

She nodded, suddenly sober. "Harry?" she asked tentatively.

"Yes, Hermione?"

"Would you--" she whispered, ducking her head before rushing, "would you kiss me?"

She missed his tiny grin and needing no further urging Harry promptly did so. It was something he had wanted too. She tilted her head, crooning in the back of her throat as he roughly plundered her mouth. Shifting his hands to cup the back of her head, Harry seized her, laying claim to all she offered. Hermione valiantly fought to keep up with his onslaught before capitulating to the storm he created.

Her hands clutched his back, his shoulders, before emulating his hold on her by curling up and around his head holding him to her. One slanted kiss merged into another until they became too numerous to count. Harry groaned in dual agony when she threw herself at him, leaning completely against his chest, her breasts squashed tightly against him, as she turned the assault around.

Harry stilled abruptly when the air shifted in the room. Breaking the kiss he pulled away slightly as the door swung open leading into the dungeon room. Dumbledore's stoic gaze took in the state of the room. Hermione lay suspended in his arms, clearly surprised by the Headmaster's appearance but too elated to move.

"I heard a ruckus," Dumbledore said mildly, eyes twinkling.

Harry cocked an eyebrow. "Really? And you decided now was the best time to enter the room?"

"I see that the mirror did not stay intact."

Harry shrugged, rubbing a hand along Hermione's back soothingly as he stated, "It wasn't a high priority at the time."

"It was a priceless family heirloom."

Harry glared at him. "Then you could have done the dirty work. I rescued Hermione, destroyed a Horcrux or two and you're complaining I didn't preserve your precious Ravenclaw family heirloom. Are you mad or just plain stupid?"

Dumbledore lost his twinkle noticing the dead snake on the floor. "About the Horcruxes, Harry--"

"Another time," Harry inserted firmly, standing up with Hermione draped across his arms. "Right now I am bringing Hermione to the hospital wing."

And himself, he added silently. He was going to need potions.

With a casual wave of his wand, Harry brought along Oorjit's corpse and quit the room. Hermione giggled rather insanely as they left Dumbledore behind. Harry looked in askance.

"Only you Harry could flummox Dumbledore so readily with a flick of a wrist."

"If only I could flummox you so easily," Harry replied, pressing a kiss to her temple.

She yawned sleepily and rested her head against his shoulder. Harry savored the weight of her pressed against him as he pulled himself up the last flight of stairs. It had been much too long since he had last done so.

Inside the hospital wing Madam Pomfrey neatly and efficiently put Hermione to bed and dowsed her with potions. Harry recognized Pepper-Up and Vigor-Oomph but after that they became a blur as Pomfrey hustled and bustled. She even managed to get him to take some potions during all her bustling to and fro. To Harry they were recognizable only by their extremely nasty flavor, but they cured what ailed him. He refused to be put to bed when the time came and ignored the Dreamless Sleep potion offered up to him.

Instead, while Hermione was unconscious sleeping her way through the multiple doses Harry sat down and brought Oorjit to him. Extremely mindful of the circumstances to which he lost his last friend, Harry folded his wings back in to a normal position and conjured an ornate emerald green box. Inside, like with Serion, Harry laid Oorjit out so that he looked like he was sleeping instead of dead. The inscription on the inside of the box wrote itself in Harry's neatest handwriting.

The silver lettering read in Parseltongue:

Lying here is Oorjit, loyal friend and courageous warrior. He served his King to the last breath. The great grasses are his eternal reward, where all who come across his path will hail him as the hero he truly was. We will meet again. --King Harry the First.

--

Later after Hermione was released by Healer Pomfrey, she and Harry found themselves ensconced in the shrieking shack. Harry had spruced the place up for her arrival. Regina, Milo and Reginald were ordered to go scouting for more recruits, thus keeping them out of the way for what was to happen next.

Harry stared at his hands, flexing them wondering where to start. This was going to be difficult. Opening up to Hermione again, letting her close, but he would do his utmost to try. Nearly losing her again was a terror he couldn't face with bland indifference. He loved her completely, even when she didn't understand him, even when she let her mouth run away with her, even when he pushed her away.

He wouldn't push her away now. It was time for healing old wounds and forging forward towards the future, whatever the future might have in store for him or them.

Taking a deep breath, Harry grabbed her hand and looked up. "You hurt me, Hermione," he said, holding her gaze, "whether you knew what you were doing or not. You would say that you respected my wishes to back off and clear my head and then you'd do something demanding that I come back and forget it. I needed you to understand and you didn't."

"Harry-- I'm--"

He cut her off with a shake of his head. "We both have our insecurities, but you should have trusted me to be on my own and come back in my own time. It's not like I would date the first witch I met after you. Do you know how long coming it was trusting you enough to open up? You know the upbringing I had. My parents ignored me and I fought for the right to be there--food, clothes, all my needs were ignored--"

Hermione clutched tighter on his hand. She wavered unsteadily for a moment as he watched her connect the dots as he laid them out.

"It's been a long time coming, seventeen years coming, to get over Daniel. Even though I've let it go, it's been almost a ritualistic habit of jealousy and hate..."

She made a noise in the back of her throat, high and beseeching, but Harry continued, rubbing his thumb softly over the skin of her palm.

"This overwhelming, crippling, emotion would crop up again and again when I least expected it. Every time it did I felt like I hadn't made any progress at all and the whole process had to start all over again... that's what happened Hermione. I had to start all over again just as I thought I'd finally, finally, let it go. Seeing you with him broke something."

"Harry, please," she whispered, her eyes watering.

He smiled wryly. "You remember the pranks. I just wanted to prove that you couldn't ignore me--"

"That wasn't me!"

"I know, but I thought it was you," he reminded her. "I'm sorry I couldn't help you pick up the pieces. I know your life was thrown into chaos, but I couldn't think of that. It was selfish but necessary... I couldn't just forget."

"Me neither." Hermione touched his knee with her other hand. "I couldn't forget because you wouldn't let me forget."

Harry took that hand in his too and held them tight as he vowed, "I promise I will try, try to make things work between us, but things just can't be the same."

"We could start anew," Hermione offered, earnestly.

Harry laughed derisively. "I don't if I have time for that. I probably won't get the opportunity to do so."

"What do you mean?" she asked, gripping his hand nervously.

"The Horcruxes are all destroyed. Voldemort is mortal, the time to strike is now before he decides to make more of them. If he knew all of what I've done he'd take his chances by making the Horcruxes too close together. He would risk everything to be immortal again even his magic."

“All of them?”

Harry nodded. “What do you think I was doing away from you? Twiddling my thumbs?”

“No--yes--I don’t know.” Hermione shook her head. “There was seven?”

“Yes, seven. There was the diary, the ring, the cup, the locket, the mirror, and the garter. All that’s left is Voldemort.”

“The last seventh.”

Harry nodded. “The most challenging. Seven is strong Arithmatically and going after Voldemort last makes him the seventh. Even with all my training with Flitwick I don’t feel confident going toe to toe to him in an extended battle. I’ve survived this long because I could escape and I did. Over and over again.”

“You can’t face him!” Hermione burst out, clutching his forearms, a wild look in her eye. “You simply can’t. I can’t lose you, not now, not after we just got back together.”

“I must,” he said gravely.

“Why?” she asked. “Why you?”

“Because Daniel can’t and the prophecy must be fulfilled. A Potter son will defeat Voldemort. It’s the only way.”

“But I love you!”

Harry crooked a smile at her desperate exclamation. “I love you too, but Voldemort will come after me no matter what I do. I can’t simply wait around for him. He must know I’m here in Hogsmeade, how could he not? He also knows I have taken one Horcrux. He let me take it. Tom’s hubris wouldn’t allow the notion that I could destroy it. It was his most ingenious--”

“Did you say you love me?” she whispered, her voice thick with tears.

Harry stopped speaking about Voldemort then and pulled her closed. "I love you," he repeated.

"You love me?"

"Irrevocably," he admitted, kissing her ardently.

She capitulated immediately, seeking his tongue out with hers. Slanting his mouth over hers, Harry claimed her as his once more. She sighed softly and he drew that sweet breath into himself, moaning as she wrapped her fingers through his hair, bringing him closer. His heart quickened as did hers, the cadence of them echoing in their ears. A foggy haze enveloped them as he deepened the kiss like it always did when they fell into each other.

"Marry me," she breathed, pulling back, nibbling lightly on his lower lip, keeping her hands in his hair.

Harry groaned, touching his forehead to hers. "I can't," he said wretchedly, pulling away.

She let her hands fall into her lap and looked up to him, hurt brimming in the depths of her big brown eyes. "Why not?"

"It's not that I don't want to marry you Hermione," Harry protested, his voice despairing. "We just got back together--"

"Are you afraid to be hurt again?" Hermione asked forthrightly, touching the back of his hand. "You needn't be. I have loved only you."

A furrow developed between his brows as Harry frowned. "I'm not afraid."

"Then why won't you ask me?"

Torn, Harry glanced away before settling a steady gaze at her face, urging her to understand. "I want to more than anything else in the world, please know this--"

"If you do," she quavered, her eyes shimmering brightly with tears, "ask me."

"I can't promise you forever. I can't even promise you a lifetime," he returned with a frustrated sigh, picking her hands back up in his.

"I know," she said tremulously before repeating determinedly, "Ask me."

"Hermione," he whispered, his voice ragged, watching as tears slipped from her eyes. "I can't even promise you tomorrow."

"Ask me."

Harry looked at her beseechingly. "How could I when-- I don't want you to-- Hermione..."

"Ask me, Potter."

"And if I were to run into Voldemort tonight and die?" he challenged, airing his deepest fear.

Hermione licked her lips, her eyes flashing with pain and a hint of hysteria. "Then I will love you for the rest of my life."

"I don't want you to be lonely," he insisted, pressing his lips against the tears slipping down her cheek, tasting her anguish.

"I promise I won't be sad forever, but I can't promise you that I'll find someone else to love."

Harry choked on a helpless laugh. "Hermione," he said lovingly, sadly.

"Ask me, Harry," she interjected. "No more thinking."

He took a deep breath, releasing all his fears about meeting with Voldemort, of their last stance, the final battle. With one quick glance at their joined hands, he knelt and with upturned face, took for himself the greatest joy he would ever know. "Will you marry me?"

“Yes,” she cried, lifting him up off his feet and kissing him fiercely. “Yes, yes, yes,” she sobbed in litany. “Right now, Harry. Let’s get married right now.”

“Yes,” he breathed into her mouth, closing his eyes and seizing her in his arms, laying claim to the life she promised in her kiss, in her eyes, in her touch.

--

Within the hour, Harry was standing in front of a Unite Bonder fidgeting in his dress robes. The tall wizard’s face held no expression, except one of occasional grumpiness at the lateness of the hour as the minutes ticked by. Money, and lots of it, kept the Bonder silent.

Filius patted him gently on the shoulder, quietly assuring Harry that his foolish worries were for naught. Filius was Harry’s best man, as it should be, and Harry was extremely grateful for the man’s calm support. Without him, Harry was sure to have bolted from the anxieties engulfing him. He couldn’t be a husband, he didn’t know how to be!

A quick glance to the pews, showed Hermione’s ecstatic parents. Her mother waved at him. Harry offered a tiny wave, forcibly pushing aside his own folly and gazed at the side door into the small room. Unblinkingly and with nerveless fingers, he waited with bated breath until it cracked open a smidge.

He craned his neck, trying to still a peak at his bride when the door swung open fully to reveal a smiling Luna. Harry had just enough time to register how lovely she looked in dove gray robes before Hermione appeared behind her in the doorway and he suddenly forgot to breathe.

Hermione glided toward him like an ethereal angel. Her hair was sleeked into an elegant updo, her curls tamed into artfully arranged strands around her face. Harry drank her in, avidly and visually devouring her as she sauntered toward him, a smile so lovely on her face it made his head spin. The gentle swells of her breasts were hugged tightly by the sharply slanting v-neck of her white dress robes.

The glitter of a thousand fairies floated around her, decorating her robes in designs finer than any lacer's pattern.

Harry reached out for her hand as she came close, causing Hermione to beam at him in delight. Luna took her fragrant bouquet of myrtle and pink clove. The flowers symbolized true love and quietly paid homage to a girl whose spirit was as brave as it was kind. Myrtle had loved Harry, her last act on earth had bestowed the two of them this chance to find happiness even as she continued on her journey into the afterlife.

As the vows were read, Harry rubbed his thumb across the back of Hermione's hand, squeezing her fingers lightly. She gazed up at him tenderly, her eyes glimmering with wetness as Harry spoke repeating the Bonder's words. A soft warmth spread through her as he finished, stealing her breath. The Bonder repeated the binding words and then it was her turn.

"I, Hermione Jane Granger," she said clearly, joyfully, "give myself to thee, Harry James Flitwick. I promise to love thee, cherish thee, care for thee, and support thee through all endeavors, through all times, in this life and the next."

The buzzing warmth spread wildly through Harry as she finished. The Bonder waved his wand, murmured the closure of the Uniting Together spell and the warmth seeped slowly away. The bond was still there, shimmering between them, pale yellow, the promise of new beginnings, a new life.

Harry swooped down and claimed his kiss, trailing feather-light kisses across her cheeks. "I love you, Mione," he whispered in her ear.

"I love you too," she whispered back just as Flitwick broke between them to offer his congratulations to his newly adopted son and daughter-in-law.

When Luna joined the fray, it was truly a magical moment as the group exchanged happy hugs and exuberant words.

--

They had just returned from their wedding dinner with Filius, Luna, and Hermione's parents. Now they were alone and Harry was eager to explore the carnal sweetness offered to him in his wife's eyes. He removed his ebony black bowtie, tossing it aside, heedless of its landing. He had eyes only for her.

"I know I said earlier that I couldn't promise you a lifetime," Harry said, staring down into her upturned face before the bed. "But I promise you that if tonight is all I have to show you how much I love you--how much you mean to me--" he trembled slightly. "Then I promise to show you enough love to last you a lifetime... to give you in this night a lifetime of love."

She was crying when he kissed her, the arms encircled around his neck held tighter, clinging to him and his promise even as he lowered her to the bed. Slowly he eased her arms away from his neck, holding them with one hand above her head. Nibbling lightly on her lower lip, Harry teased her with soft pliant kisses before tilting his head to nuzzle the sensitive underside of her jaw.

"No tears," he told her, catching one salty quivering drop that was tracing its way to her ear. He followed the silvery trail up to her wet eyes and kissed them close. "We have time," he promised.

"Not enough," she murmured, opening her eyes to stare up at him.

Harry lost himself in those depths, grinning crookedly as he ground his hips into hers. "Plenty of time."

"Never," she vowed and he chuckled, skimming a hand down the side of her arm, following the line of her body to her hip and back up, resting briefly on the warm curve of her breast.

She panted beneath him, squirming under his touch as he dexterously traced a lone finger down and around the soft mound of her breast, outlining its shape.

"Harry," she begged, twisting her hands in his grasp.

For an answer, his mouth slanted over hers capturing her protest, as his hand came up to rest fully on her breast, kneading and molding

the soft globe through her sweater until she cried out into his mouth. He feasted there at her lips, stroking her until she arched up into his touch, submitting unequivocally to him.

He pinched her nipple, fingering the tight bud as it cinched tighter. Hermione keened helplessly, clutching at him wildly. With a whispered word he vanished their clothes. He groaned at the contact with the searing heat of her bare skin. He trapped her wandering hands when she tried to touch him and gently held them above her head.

"Let me love you," he told her, skimming his free hand down to the bend in her knee, bringing it back up to rest upon his hip. "I have much to make up for."

When he brushed against her, she whimpered, biting her lip to hold back her pleasure before it swept her away. Harry ground against her, sliding himself between the slick folds of her sheath. He captured a nipple in his mouth and suckled, laving the tight peak with the flat of his tongue.

She bucked wildly beneath him and he chuckled lasciviously. He turned his attentions to the other peak, bringing it into the warm heat of his mouth. Hermione sighed his name, struggling to break her hands free of his relentless grip.

"Not yet," he admonished her. "We have time. You will let me worship you."

"Harr-eee," she cried out as he found her sensitive spot beneath her upturned breast, right along where the flesh met her ribs. He hummed wickedly, sending pure sensation straight through her.

His hand stroked her stomach in small circular motions, occasionally he would dip his fingers into her naval. Every twist and turn she made in response rubbed her sleek folds along his shaft. It drove him to distraction, until at such a time he couldn't withstand the delicious friction anymore.

He curled his fingers through both of her hands, interlocking them just as he interlocked their bodies with a swift thrust of his hips. Hermione gasped aloud, her back arching upwards as her whole body writhed.

“Mione,” he breathed into her hair, burying himself to the hilt.

Slowly he pulled away, earning whimpers of protest as Hermione clutched at him, her legs and muscles tightening around him. He grunted, feeling her spasm. She was so hot, so wet, his body slid back into hers with such ease as to have them both groan.

Harry worked himself in and out of her without apparent haste. Pulling back until he was nearly completely withdrawn before a measured thrust plunged him back into the tight depths of her molten core. She arched up, blindly seeking his kiss.

Unable to resist, he gave himself over to the moment, slanting his mouth powerfully over hers as he drove himself into her harder. Sweet madness descended upon them as his restraint broke and his pace picked up, crashing his hips against hers urgently.

Her breath panted hotly against his neck as she buried her head there, crying out softly with every desperate plunge of his body. Her hips undulated beneath him, matching his frenzied pace as they both strove for ultimate pleasure. He broke first, spilling his seed in a rush of heat, the strangled sound of her name, ripping from him like an oath or a prayer.

Feeding off that single glorious expression of release, Hermione hurtled over the edge after him. Her walls rippled, locking him inside her as she rode out the wave of passion. Tears pooled once more in her eyes as she clung to him all the tighter. Fear gripping her heart that this might be the last time she would ever know him. The night couldn't end... it just couldn't... it would go on forever...

And Harry felt that same pressure, that insistent voice in the back of his head prompting him to make the most of this night, for it may be their last.

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 46°«««°»»»°

Chapter 47

The morning broke softly over the exhausted lovers. Harry coming too first, laid there quietly staring down at her. Idly tracing a finger along the edge of the sheet that lay rumpled against her cute round bum, he waited for her to wake up. They had made love three times last night. The last time was the most desperate occasion. Hermione had feared losing him too greatly to let him love her slowly. They had exhausted each other.

The frenzy was still there, bubbling beneath the surface, itching to be released once more, but Harry knew better. Nothing could happen this morning or day, the very first of their marriage. There were many things to do, to prepare for their future, a future without Voldemort. Chief among them was introducing her to his snakes and telling her about his form. Perhaps even showing it to her in a full or partial change. It was imperative to do this if he wasn't to lose her, now that he had claimed her as his mate.

He knew fear made her rash and bossy, but he also knew that what drove it was love for him. That made Harry smile as he leaned over to kiss her shoulder, cupping her bum more firmly as he moved in to say good morning. She moaned in her sleep, rousing grudgingly to the day.

"Rise and shine 'Mione," he whispered in her ear, smoothing his hand over her thigh. "We have much to do and none of it involves a lie-in."

"Harry?" she mumbled, his name breaking on the second syllable into a yawn.

"Mmm-mm," he moaned, kissing her neck, feeling himself stir.

"It wasn't a dream was it?" she asked turning to face him.

He stared into her chocolate brown eyes and grinned devilishly. "Depends on what part you're referring to."

She blushed remembering how he disturbed her dreams last night. Her blush made him laugh. Vexed, she pouted, which only made him laugh louder. To stop his mirth she kissed him, pressed on by the

fervent need to have him, claim him once more. There was no accounting what would happen if she let him get out of bed.

He pulled back, resting his forehead against hers and said huskily, "Now no more of that or we'll never get out of bed."

"I like the sound of that," Hermione whispered.

Harry however shook his head and got out of bed. Lightly swatting her rump as he passed by on the way to the loo, he told her to brush her teeth as she had morning breath. A disgruntled yelp of fury reached his ears and Harry chuckled.

"You're not very nice sometimes, Mr. Flitwick," Hermione complained clunking around the bathroom while Harry took care of business in the separate water closet.

"You'll just have to fix all my bad habits then Mrs. Flitwick," Harry returned, flushing the toilet and coming out to wash his hands.

She harrumphed and scrubbed harder at her teeth. Harry pressed a chaste kiss to her jaw and motioned to his toothbrush to wake up and hop to it. It buzzed around his mouth as she watched in amazement before realizing she was dribbling and spat out the foamy paste. Harry copied her and rinsed off the brush carefully setting it aside.

Hermione watched him finish up with morning rituals with awe, nearly forgetting about her own in the process. He showered and she couldn't help herself, she followed him inside and watched as the space expanded to admit her and keep it roomy. Forgetting his resolution to start off the day on schedule, Harry grabbed Hermione and yanked her close for deep frustrated kisses that quickly led to more. They stayed there until the showerhead turned off as the heating charm wore out.

Hermione gave a sulky sigh and obediently toweled off beside Harry who rumped his hair and with a last hard kiss left the loo for the bedroom. He stooped to pull on a pair of pants and black boots before tugging on a green jumper and throwing his cloak over his shoulders.

He turned to find her putting on her bra and was arrested at the sight. He could imagine just how he would peel it off her and just where he would kiss her... Harry cleared his throat. Hermione glanced up and blushed slightly before straightening the straps and soothing down the front and slipping a blue jumper over her arms.

When she finished dressing Harry escorted her out of the door and down to the AMAS in Diagon Alley where he side-apparated her to Hogsmeade. They popped into existence and stepped off the platform in unison.

"Where to now?" Hermione asked, looking over her shoulder at the highest tower of Hogwarts, barely visible from where they stood.

"My lair," Harry replied with a sly grin.

She wrinkled her nose at him. "Why?"

Harry turned serious. "Because there are things you need to know. Things I probably should have told you last night but didn't."

Hermione frowned up at him. "You're speaking in riddles."

Harry nodded. "We're not ensured privacy at the moment, wait until we get there."

"Where's there?"

"A modified Shrieking Shack, for now. We'll be moving shortly. I don't trust the wards I put up to last much longer, especially with all the people and beings allowed through them either on tutoring business or here on political."

"Wards? Political?" Hermione said with a questioning lilt.

Harry nodded and steered her around Honeydukes. As they slipped away from the village to its outer skirts, Hermione noticed uneasily at the amount of snakes slithering in and out of the path. She glanced at Harry whose look of total unconcern reassured her. Stepping closer to him, she linked her arm through his and snuggled closer.

They got there and Harry spoke in Parsletongue to three snakes guarding the entrance before slipping by. Hermione glanced at Harry nervously but he smiled and squeezed her hand.

"It's all right," Harry assured her, guiding her to the restored drawing room. "I've been using this place as Headquarters."

"Why would you need Headquarters?"

Harry motioned her to sit and conjured up a tray of tea and biscuits. "Because I am a leader in this war. I need to be reachable by the right people."

"But this is the shrieking shack! Voldemort's bound to know--"

"Yes," Harry agreed, "but that's why we're moving bases before the day's out. I informed the three at the entrance to run and tell the others so the switch can go smoothly."

"I'm not use to it," she admitted. "You've always tried to hush up speaking Parseltongue so it's strange listening to you speak. I mean you told me about your toy snake and I saw you in action during the duel against Daniel but it's mind boggling."

"Dumbledore can speak Mermish."

Hermione grinned. "Yes, and that's mind boggling too!"

"Hermione," Harry stated earnestly, "I am more than just a Parselmouth."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm the King of Snakes. Crazy, I know, believe me, I know, but true."

"But doesn't Volde--"

"Yes, he does. That is why more than anything else I must fight him, claim visually my title. The snakes know whose the true Lord of Snakes but Voldemort won't believe otherwise until I show him unequivocally."

“How do you know you’re the king?”

“My animagus form is that of a basilisk. Basilisks are the royalty of the snake line. I am the only known basilisk. The red stripe in my hair is the outward symbol of my crown.”

Hermione stared blankly at him before visibly collecting herself. “You’re a what?”

Harry laughed. “I do believe Mrs. Flitwick that I have left you speechless. Yes, I’m a basilisk.”

He then did a partial transformation with scales and the crown. A completely dazzled expression took over her as she reached out vaguely to touch him. Harry moved closer encouraging the contact and relished the warmth of her hand against his cool scales. She seemed memorized by the feel of them and Harry watched her face with enjoyment at her rapt absorption in him.

“You feel like cool velvet,” she whispered, looking up at him directly.

“You should be careful of that,” Harry remarked, kissing her eyes closed one at a time. “I have a lot of control for an animagus. I believe it’s the king in me, but my form is dangerous, especially the eyes. I would die if I accidentally were to petrify or kill you.”

“I trust you,” Hermione said opening her eyes when his lips left her face. “You won’t risk a change in your eyes. You’re too strong to let the change overwhelm you.”

“I am now,” he agreed, slipping back to his natural state. “Not at the beginning though. It took me by complete surprise.”

“I would imagine,” Hermione remarked idly before kissing him lightly. “I won’t even bring up how impossible it should be to acquire a magical creature transformation. In Boscal’s Theory the way to accomplish it is through raw power and affinity as well as by a method of--”

“Metaphysical bonding, of which was lost eons back in magical history,” Harry finished.

Hermione pecked him on the mouth for that and backed up. "Think you're so clever."

Harry grinned. "Yes, but now that you've seen my form and know what I am, we must talk. A lot has changed in a very little time. I have duties and demands now I did not have before."

--

Hermione watched Harry talk freely to snakes for the second time that day, a strange but engrossed expression on her face. When Harry inquired she told him it was fascinating and a little creepy. In battle he'd only spoken a few phrases to make something happen with magic but listening to the hissing tones of the language in conversation caused shivers to run up and down her spine.

"You'll get use to it," Harry replied nonchalantly, reminding her about what they'd discussed earlier before switching safe houses to a flat in a square just off Diagon Alley. "I don't know what it sounds like. I don't even know I'm speaking a different language most of the time."

"What were the three of you speaking about?"

"They're my delegation to Persephone. I'm sending a third this time, a new recruit, so that Silver can stay locally and be my go between for those in Voldemort's camp."

"You have snakes on the inside with Voldemort?"

"Yes," Harry replied.

"How do you know they are loyal to you?" Hermione asked.

Harry looked insulted for a moment before clearing his expression. "Hermione, I'm their King."

"But being their king doesn't ensure loyalty!"

"There are more differences between humans and snakes than the ability to walk upright," Harry confided. "Their loyalty is unfathomable. Kind of like the Hufflepuffs and their work hard. It's a shame they

have such a bad reputation in the wizarding world; muggle world too for that matter. But lucky for me spring weather is in full force or I'd have to find a way to feed all of them so they could keep their energy."

"Harry," Hermione asked, watching the three snakes leave. "Do you fear for the ones in Voldemort's circle? What if he finds out their trickery?"

Harry looked apprehensive for a moment but steeled his features. "Losing them would set us back, but there are more than enough snakes to take their place."

"How cruel, Harry."

Harry shook his head. "Practical. I am not close to them like I was to Serion or Oorjit. They are servants, not friends. They do my bidding. I am bound to protect them but should they fall I won't regret their passing."

--

Luna handed Harry a muggle newspaper and the latest edition of the Quibbler. Glancing down at the headlines, Harry suppressed a chuckle.

"You wouldn't happen to know anything about this would you?" she asked meaningfully.

"You mean do I know anything about," he glanced down. "Massive Outbreak From London Zoo's Snake Exhibition? Or Snake Sightings Increased Three-Fold? Why no, Luna," he replied innocently. "Of course not."

"How silly of me," Luna replied smirking. "I don't know what came over me, implicating you in such nastiness."

"Not nasty, surely," Harry said handing back the periodicals. "Merely noble."

"Perhaps even kingly?"

"Perhaps," Harry agreed.

--

Ashton flicked his tongue out patiently, content to wait on his liege to make a decision. When an answer didn't come he hissed quietly, "Milord?"

Harry gazed meditatively ahead of him, watching from the roof the carnage happening below. §Let the strike force know the time to act is now,§ he commanded and pulled out his wand.

Disillusioning himself, Harry jumped over the side of the roof to land on the charmed springy ground below. A silencing charm on the way down ensure the quietness of his landing.

A team of giants aligned with Voldemort were wrecking havoc on the muggle village. His intelligence team had sent word to London of this large strike force rampaging through the country-side two days ago. This is the first time Harry had caught up with them. The muggle media hadn't heard of the strange attacks. The Ministry hadn't either, not that they would need to send an Obliviation Squad out to correct the memories of the survivors. There were none.

That would change, Harry thought. Aiming at the Gurg's eyes, Harry fired off one spell and then another, watching with satisfaction as the giant stumbled around in agony before being struck down by the bites of numerous venomous snakes.

The twelve other giants raiding the town hadn't noticed this with all the muggles running around yelling. Harry kept an eye out for the Death Eaters rounding them up and dispatched the lonely sentinel powering the muggle repulsion barrier with a bludgeoning hex to the head. Tapping into the wards was a matter of minutes and the havoc of the villagers increased ten-fold as the muggles screamed at the sight of their freedom. They now understood how to get out.

Harry flicked his hand, sending tremors to the ground. Another sign to his snakes. Two more giants fell, bringing them down to ten as Harry watched his alpha team move out disperse like phantom shadows in

the night. Joining them, Harry took grim satisfaction at beating back the presence of his enemy.

When half the giants had fallen, the rest finally noticed something amiss. Harry chortled wickedly and the fight began in earnest. The giants' attention left the fleeing muggles in pursuit of foot stomping and random crunching of clubs to the ground. Harry danced in and out of the way, sometimes banishing his snakes out of the way, sometimes bringing down another giant.

The sound of fleeing apparition pops, told Harry that the Death Eaters he had yet to find were retreating. If they were smart they would play dead and not run to inform their master. Voldemort would not be pleased to see his giant force laid low. The bearer of such bad tidings would surely suffer some unpleasanties. But no matter, it would reach muggle and wizarding headlines by the early edition.

"Boy-Who-Lived, Lone Soldier, Beats Back A Rampaging Tribe of Giants in Suffolk."

And his scar burned.

--

But that wasn't what read in the headlines the next morning. At the urging of a flustered angry Prophet owl Harry climbed out of bed and opened the window at five in the morning. Paying the beleaguered creature in knuts and owl treats, Harry sat down by the breakfast nook and opened the Prophet.

"You-Know-Who Kidnaps Boy-Who-Lived's Brother"

Before Harry could read the article the window was being abused once again by an owl. Harry dropped the paper and went to greet it before Hermione woke up. The great horn owl delivered the *Nothumberland Soothsayer* and took off. Harry glanced at the front page.

"Charlatan Boy-Who-Lived Captured!"

The foreboding that had been increasing in Harry's gut two days ago erupted into full-blown worry. His scar similarly flared up, searing his thoughts with stray fragments of emotions that weren't his. A pair of arms encircled him from behind and Harry leaned back gratefully, accepting Hermione's silent comfort.

She let him go when *Hogsmeade Observer* and *Centaur Vision* arrived. A glance at the front showed that they held similar headlines. He handed one to her and sat down again. The more they read the more certain that it was not a trick. Daniel Potter had been captured by Death Eaters on the way back from an unsanctioned trip to Hogsmeade.

Dumbledore's picture flashed grimly before them as reporters questioned him on the validity of his wards. Questions like how could a seventeen year old manage to skip out on the curfew and castle lock down? Did he really know all the ins and outs of Hogwarts? And why did Harry leave Hogwarts? Just wait, Harry thought with satisfaction, when they find out the old goat expelled him. They would have a field day with that.

James and Lily Potter were quoted begging for their son Harry to go and save him as owls were not reaching their youngest son. Harry snorted at that, for he was no longer their son, and how convenient was it on James' behalf to ignore the fact that he had been disinherited and disowned during the duel. Ad of course they didn't know or didn't acknowledge Harry's recent adoption. They just wanted Daniel back safe and Harry was the means to do it. Plus it made him look bad by ignoring their concerned pleas for help.

By the end of all the articles he grimly acknowledged his time was up. The Horcruxes were gone, it was time to face the Dark Lord once and for all... fulfill the prophecy one way or the other... with his death or Voldemort's.

Glancing up at Hermione, she folded the last newspaper and gazed at him in fear, her face pale. Harry leaned over and held her hand, squeezing her fingers.

"We knew this would come," he told her. "I would have to fight him eventually. More than one prophecy said so--"

“But they’re so self-fulfilling! Why don’t we hide, Harry? Disappear somewhere and never return? He wouldn’t find you then.”

Harry shook his head, rubbing at his prickly scar. “We’d delay the inevitable. Magic has ways of running the world, convoluted turns of fate decided by a whim. We can’t hide forever. Magic wouldn’t allow it.”

“Why not? Divination is such a wooly discipline.”

“I don’t disagree, but only because it can’t be taught. Divination is a talent much like speaking with snakes. Only a few like Luna have it. We can’t run. If I ran I might balance the scales in Voldemort’s favor.”

Neither one mentioned Daniel. He was irrelevant to them now. A name from Harry’s past, a figure of grief between them. There was nothing to tie either one to the wizard. As a nameless face, they could be guiltless by such an action; by turning their backs on Britain and on the Potters.

The option appealed to both at different levels. But Hermione’s practical side came out as she nodded slowly, worrying her lower lip. “He could make more Horcruxes.”

“Yes,” Harry agreed. “Decide he liked the number thirteen after all. If he did, we would have no idea where to start looking. The Founder objects are all used up. He’s had one from every house, and two from his past. There are no more objects like that.”

“He might want to make them out of the same items Portkeys are made out of.”

“Or start stealing British muggle artifacts, claiming another history for himself.”

“So many ifs Harry,” she stated, leaning into him.

“Only if we turn from this.”

She clung to him, burying her face in his neck, sobbing. “I don’t want to lose you.”

Awkwardly he rubbed her back, murmuring, "You make it out like I will lose, Mione. Have you no confidence in me?"

Hermione pulled back and peppered his face and neck with kisses. "I have all the confidence in you. I just don't have any in Vvoldemort."

"He is a right cheating bastard," Harry agreed in a sad attempt to lighten the mood.

She hit him in the shoulder. "Prat. That's not funny. I know I you have to go. I don't like it."

"I know," he replied, kissing her softly.

"Promise me something," she said, breaking off the kiss. "Promise me."

"Anything."

"Before you go--promise me that you won't protect Daniel over yourself. If it's between you and him living--put yourself first."

"That's all?" Harry asked, genuinely surprised.

"I need you," she reminded him. "Don't do anything stupid."

"Too late."

"Harry."

"I promise, Hermione," he vowed. "Nothing of the sort."

"Good," she declared, reaching up to brush his hair back from his forehead. "Now we can make those rescue plans."

"I'll need to get in contact with Persephone's kiss."

"Don't forget the centaurs. Bane's on your side. They've known about Mars rising or whatever that gibberish is for years. He doesn't like it, but he has little choice in the matter."

"The stars preordained the joining of his tribe to my snakes."

"Total rot in my opinion," Hermione sniffed.

Harry laughed. "I know, love. Star gazing is nothing but a shame."

"Yes, well," she murmured, dropping his hand. "I'll go make a list."

Harry laughed at that, his spirits lifting. "Don't ever change, Mione. Don't ever change."

"And you need to contact Filius and Luna," she replied primly.

--

Later in the afternoon Harry succumbed to the ever growing pain in his scar. A short Occlumency meditation followed by a nap to deal with the throbbing was in order. He laid down to rest across Hermione's lap, tuning out the loud 'conversation' between her and Luna over how to infiltrate Voldemort's lair. A little nap ought to clear his mind right up and leave him fresh. He fell asleep to the gentle stroking of Hermione's hand over his brow and through his hair.

--

He cast the Cruciatus again. The boy screamed in agony, contorting violently on the earthy floor. He watched without compassion, smirking as the blood curdling screams became high girly shrieks.

Breaking the boy was going to be too easy. He let up the curse, so that he might enjoy inflicting it again. The boy wasn't a complete gibbering lunatic. Yet.

"Not so heroic now, are you Daniel Potter," he taunted, leaning down to carefully wipe the blood from the boy's chin. "Not without your little brother here to save you."

The boy's teeth chattered violently, as he tried to regain control of himself. "He'll come," he swore. "He always does."

"Ah," he said mockingly. "But will he after all you've done? You showed him no mercy--no love. Why would he come to rescue you,

the arrogant-girlfriend-stealing-glory-hound? Why now, when he's got everything and you nothing?"

"Because it's the right thing to do," Daniel stammered. "Harry always does the right thing."

"I'm counting on it," he sneered, throwing the boy back onto the ground. Shadows lined up around them and he smiled thinly, red eyes narrowing in hatred. Sparing one last glance at the pathetic shivering wizard he repeated, "I'm counting on it."

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 47°«««°»»»°

Chapter 48

Harry stepped from the shadowy hall into a murky chamber, lit with glowing sconces that seemed to consume light instead of emitting it. Ashton, Pathos, Ethos, and Logos slithered at his feet. It should be noted that the “Os” were a runespoor, and those were the names of its three heads. Logos hissed steadily under his breath as Harry stepped forward to greet the vampire sitting on her throne.

He stopped in front of her dais just as she stood, long black hair falling in waves to her waist. She was tiny and ethereal with a veneer of sweetness superimposed over a cruel aptitude. Looking at her eyes, Harry could see that pragmatic hunter so deftly hidden. Her eyes glowed blue for a moment as she tried to enthrall him.

Harry sneered. “I would normally wait for you to visit me for our first greetings, but your summoning came at an excellent time.”

Persephone grinned predatorily. “I know Serpent King; on both counts. I too have read the papers. Your fight is drawing much closer. Cassidy has predicted the final hours.”

Harry digested the information with a blink, betraying no emotion. “Are you prepared to join me in battle as you promised?” he asked, with a hint of steel in his voice. “I should warn you that breaking your earlier pledge would not be taken lightly.”

“Easy, Serpent King,” Persephone whispered, her pale skin shimmering as she moved closer. Harry held his ground as she ran her fingers over his shoulders. “I bring news of pleasant tidings. The vampire legislature has progressed forward favorably.

“For that you can thank my wife,” Harry replied, standing stoic under her advances. “She researched the Ministry bylaws and rewrote some of your treatise.”

Persephone smiled pleasantly, stepping back. “I know that as well. I have informants everywhere.”

“Hermione will continue to help you should I fail,” he informed rigidly.

“Marvelous,” she purred. “You were wise to have ensured your end of the bargain. In that case my whole Kiss will be behind your efforts. You have a plan to roust the Usurper?”

“Be visible.”

Persephone tiskied. “No, no, that will not do at all. You can’t expect to go strolling through Diagon Alley and expect Voldemort to take the bait.”

“Do you know where he is? I have a fairly good idea, but Luna can’t get a read on him.”

“I do,” she replied, baring her fangs. “Let us go take out our plan over dinner.”

--

§I think we should send in the fire-snakes first. Let them creep into the crannies of the house and set fire to them,§ Ethos rasped from beside Harry.

§The boa constrictors, anacondas, and vipers can follow them and round up as many Death Eaters as possible,§ Harry replied pointing at a map of the interior of the manor at Little Hangleton provided by Persephone’s double agent minions.

§What about the winged snakes?§

§They will be perched amidst the trees. Their job will be to stop Death Eaters from escaping.§

§What about the dead ones?§ Pathos asked, for once not looking around dreamily.

§They are allies until they fight against us. If they do, strike them down.§ Harry returned coldly. All the assurances Persephone gave him were not going to buy his trust. They would earn it.

Hermione slipped her hand in Harry’s and pointed at the northern wall. “Luna and I can take those ward keystones down. I think between the

two of us we know enough about a number of wards and booby traps to negotiate them pretty easily.”

“Unless Voldemort has added more since I was last there,” Harry warned.

“Of course, Harry.” She squeezed his fingers, and he squeezed back.

A resounding crash echoed through the room to them, followed by a warbled yelp of pain. Harry looked toward the door behind which Flitwick was crash course training Luna for what to expect from Death Eaters. He must have nailed the nimble-footed seer with a curse. Tuning them out he went back to the map and proceeded to mark down where the vampires would be joining the fight.

But what he was really worried about were the giants. The Gurg said they were on his side, but in battle the true alliance would be known. He couldn’t count on them to hold their positions.

--

Harry glanced up from his seat in their Diagon headquarters as Luna drifted into his office. She floated dreamily around the room touching papers and books.

“Ah...” Harry began when she suddenly turned around.

“In battle tomorrow,” she intoned formidably, “the plover will crow into victory should the King keep his gaze reserved.”

“Luna?” Harry questioned, ignoring the ominous way the light grew darker in the room and the way her hair flew in an absent breeze. “Are you telling me I have to break out into petrifying and killing Death Eaters with my Basilisk gaze.”

Luna’s eyes glowed white as she whispered scratchily, “There are no weasels in play, but your other enemies will appear. Their task is mortal, they will kill the Queen.”

“Shit,” Harry breathed leaping from his chair as Luna slumped to the ground unconscious. He caught her deftly and laid her gently on the small sofa he had just vacated.

Touching her feverish skin, Harry called out for Milo to go and fetch potions from their medicinal cabinets. He had never seen anything like this from Luna. He conjured two wet towels and wrapped one around her throat and draped the other over her forehead.

“Damn bloody spiders,” he cursed, prying open Luna’s mouth to trickle water down her throat with his wand. “Come on Luna. Come back to us.”

--

§It won’t work,§ declared Logos as they waited at the edge of the trees for Hermione and Luna to knock down the first set of wards. The runespoor had been upset to find another three-headed snake in charge of the Queen and Luna’s safety but had stopped complaining when its task had been handed over.

The anti-travel wards crashed down with a bang. The air rippled as the magic pulsed outwards. Voldemort knew they were here. Logos repeated his statement stubbornly.

Harry glanced down at the runespoor’s left head. Logos was the critic, more pessimistic and cynical than any snake he’d ever met. He reminded Harry of Professor Snape. Ethos started to berate Logos during Harry’s momentary distraction until Pathos make a plea for them to stop their bickering. Harry rolled his eyes and hit the runespoor with a silencing hex.

§All of you be quiet,§ Harry said sternly. §This is not the time to gang up on each other. You must remain focused. I am counting on you to do your job killing the roosters. When I transform there had better be none in the area. When Luna cracks the warding keystone she and Hermione will add an anti-poultry ward.§

§Yes master,§ they murmured together bowing their heads.

As the next wards dropped a faint throb echoed through his scar. Harry smirked sinisterly as the air rippled once again. A flash of light from his wand signaled the start of the battle.

--

In silence he apparated into the graveyard coming into existence behind a stone angel. Harry surveyed the tableau before him. It was exactly like his dream of Voldemort with the exception of Ashton, whose dark gray body slithered nearly unseen through the short grasses scattered between the stones. The ashwinder would burn through Daniel's bonds and herd him to safety. It was Harry's job to find Voldemort and take him down.

His skin prickled as the nightwalker ward went down, heralding the arrival of Persephone's Kiss, thirty strong in all. They would find Lucius, Nott, Macnair, Snape, and Bellatrix and remove them from the equation. The spiders would be picked off sure enough by the centaurs whenever they made their appearance. Harry's focus would not be distracted because of them.

The newly mortal Voldemort was around, Harry's scar informed him so, but the bastard was hiding. Harry kept one eye on Ashton's progress and the other on the shadows creeping forward from the tree line. He felt a warning shiver race up his spine. Harry lunged out of the way as a curse exploded the angel above him.

§I've been expecting you, Harry,§ Voldemort sneered launching another curse.

Harry dived to the ground without a thought. The moment he ate dirt he apparated out of the way of another curse fractions of a second before it splashed where he had been.

§You can't hide, Usurper!§ Voldemort taunted, spinning violently around, landing the first curse when Harry came back into existence.

Harry grunted in pain as his leg fractured at the impact. Instead of fixing it he retaliated by hurling several spells at Voldemort. He smirked when the bone crusher hit and Voldemort stumbled facing an injury similar to his. Then as nimble as a one legged wizard could he

apparated and landed behind another grave stone thankful he hadn't splinched himself.

His leg was throbbing like a hippogriff and a hasty medical charm only healed the bone. The throbbing continued unhampered and as Harry knew from fighting with Flitwick the twinging would stop after fourteen hours. He would have to work around it--just like Voldemort.

Peeking over the headstone Harry saw flame and breathed a sigh of relief; until a scream cut through the air. Ashton was dead. Harry growled and threw a paint charm over the distance and watched it explode over a disillusioned figure.

§Coward!§ Harry taunted, throwing another spell only to see it batted away.

Daniel slumped against the grave as Voldemort turned his attentions back to Harry. The paint vanished from his robes and then he vanished. Harry looked around warily and did the same.

§I knew it would get your attention!§ Voldemort announced oily from his left.

Harry turned toward the voice only to get hit by a galleon in the middle of his forehead. It clattered to his feet and Harry laughed, disappearing. This time he landed behind Voldemort and hit him with a Parseltongue curse.

Carefully he walked over as Voldemort flopped on the ground from the pain of his insides boiling. §I started wearing a portable portkey ward after the last time your minions got me. Never again will you catch me off guard.§

A killing curse flew past his ear and Harry smiled. §Your aim is off,§ he said mildly, throwing stunner followed by an summoner.

Voldemort blocked both and cancelled the curse with a murmured oath in Parsletongue. Harry noted this and darted backward as an angry onslaught hurtled across the short distance to him. Ducking and dodging Harry avoided the worst of them.

§You might be my match, boy,§ Voldemort admitted sourly. §But I have years of experience and careful allegiances over you. Your little friends won't last a minute.§ "Morsmordre!"

The sky light up with the sickly green glow of Voldemort's mark. Voldemort grinned smugly as the ground rumbled. Loose stones shook, rattling the air as giants broke the clearing first. Harry conjured a broadsword. Holding both wand and sword in the same hand he whipped his head toward the battle cries of the ogres and trolls caught up with the giants and crashed through the opposite set of trees. Faint cries filled the air as snakes were trampled on, swallowing hard Harry turned back toward a sneering Voldemort.

§I wonder how many of them called you master?§ Voldemort asked softly. §No matter, no matter. I had my own snake legion.§

§You don't care if they die?§

§No more than you, Usurper. You killed the only one I cared about. Now I've killed your little fire-snake.§

Harry bared his teeth, hurling a hex to the ground at Voldemort's feet. §Your familiar kept mine fed for months.§

Voldemort snarled. Spells flashed back and forth between them like a tempest. All around them battles erupted as vampires and Death Eaters finally met in combat. The thundering crowd caused chaos wherever they went, disrupting clashes and finishing some. Through it all Harry saw Flitwick fighting like a maniac, causing swift and decisive damage to every opponent.

A brief prayer for Hermione and Luna's safety was all Harry could afford. A troll came crashing toward him brandishing his club. Voldemort sent a flurry of killing curses, hampering Harry as the troll struck. Clipped in the shoulder he went flying backwards into a tree. Voldemort's high pitch laugh met him as he sauntered over, hitting Harry in the ribs with another bone crusher.

§I am going to kill you now,§ he said, pointing his wand directly at Harry's head. §No snake, man, or beast will ever doubt my power again. I will rule all!§

--

Arild, the leader of the occamy strike force, shifted agitatedly beside his second and third in command. Harry's orders were to subdue all escapees, but with the giants betrayal the tide was turning. Even the centaurs couldn't hold them back with their arrows. Land snakes were dying by the dozens underfoot of the beastly creatures. He had made his decision. May the King have mercy on his soul.

§Attack!§ Arild bellowed, rearing up into the air. §Go! Go! Go!§

Balin and Rania echoed the battle cry and launched their teams into the air following Arild's descent into madness. They hurtled down into the ranks of the giants and trolls and ogres. Every occamy wrapped around a neck and squeezed. None were missed.

Soon the gurgles of dying massive baboons filled the air. And it was music.

--

§Not while I have a say about it,§ Harry rasped, clutching his ribs. A thought and he started to transform.

A killing curse splashed against his robes disintegrating them as his scales reflected the rest of it away. Had it been his eyes, Harry thought, growling. Higher and higher he rose up, his large coils pushed Voldemort back until the wizard wisely disapparted. His head cleared the trees and Harry let out a battle cry, causing the whole field to quiet.

"Is that a--a--a--basilisk?" one wounded Death Eater whispered, breaking the thrall.

"CLOSE YOUR EYES!"

"RUN FOR IT!"

Harry reared back and roared. Voldemort stumbled backwards as Harry lunged for him. Voldemort attempted to conjure a rooster only to find the half formed chicken turn into stone. He tried again and

again. Harry laughed as the stone poultry army grew at his enemy's feet.

§Enough. You dared for power beyond yourself, Riddle,§ Harry called down, pulverizing gravestones beneath his weight as he chased after the older wizard.

Spells bounced off of Harry's scales as Riddle tried in desperation to penetrate his thick hide. When a particularly nasty jinx landed in his eyes Harry hesitated expecting pain. Voldemort thinking he had the advantage tossed another only to find Harry absorbing it with a laugh and a nasty swipe of his tail slammed Voldemort into the ground.

§You're finished Tom,§Harry hissed, looping his tail around Voldemort's sprawled out form and smashing him on the other side. §The big boys will take it from here. Careful, now, to not to open your eyes.§

"Integrum caucus!" Voldemort screamed as his lower legs were finally crushed under Harry's weight.

The blinding curse flew high and Harry chuckled. §You can't blind me, I am not a dragon. My weak spot is not my eyes.§

Red eyes glowed as a legilimens probe attacked. "Rupturaoculus!"

--

Bane released his arrow with deadly accuracy. A Death Eater fell as it pierced through his skull. The vampire behind the dark supporter flashed a grateful toothy smile and melted back into the shadows.

He loaded another arrow and shifted sight, taking aim on a strangling troll. The foul smelling beast clawed frantically at the occamy curled around its neck but Bane ignored the grappling. His aim was true. The arrow embedded into the middle of the troll's forehead and it fell forward with a resounding crash.

Bane reached for another arrow and grunted in shock. Pinchers ripped through his flanks. The venom released numbed the pain and the world grew darker. Glancing up at the stars Bane took comfort in

their telling of a brighter future, one without Mars, before his body shuddered and died.

--

Harry glared at a Death Eater who attempted to interfere, killing him instantly. §Poor Tom, you must be desperate; all your allies and minions are dying. Force wand away.§

Voldemort's eyes squeezed tighter as the words materialized magically and tore his wand away. Harry watched in amusement as a desperate grab was made. §Your eyesight is not all I'm going to deprive you of, Tom. I have destroyed all that is most precious to you and your survival.§

§One familiar, a few trophies, and a handful of minions hardly--§

§No, not trophies...soul containers,§ Harry informed oily. §Each and every last one.§

Voldemort paled impressively at that. §You couldn't possibly have found them all. I would have known. You're fishing.§

§The diary, locket, ring, cup, mirror, and garter,§ Harry chanted. §And you, makes seven.§

§Not quite yet,§ Voldemort hissed contemptuously. §Give me a mirror!§ he declared, calling on the Parseltongue to force the magic to do his bidding without a wand as a proper focus.

A large mirror broke into existence signaled by an ominous burst of noise. Harry recoiled averting his gaze from his image. Voldemort seized the distraction to disapparate. Cursing loudly, Harry flicked out his tongue, tasting the air.

A faint taste of evil beckoned at his senses. Harry glided forward, weaving out of the cemetery. Voldemort was retreating to higher ground. Racing through the forest Harry followed the lingering scents of Voldemort's short stops into reality.

§Come out come out, Tom,§ Harry beckoned, licking his fangs. §You can't hide forever! The hopping will soon wear you out and then you'll be worst off then you were.§

Harry crashed through the last of the trees, ending up at the base of the large hillside. Voldemort was standing in the middle of the road, chest heaving, red eyes flashing in the gloom. In his hand glistened a sword the length of his arm. With Little Hangleton spread out behind him, Voldemort looked the part of the hero.

Tilting his head, Harry gazed intently on Voldemort. §A sword? This is familiar,§ he murmured wryly, rearing back and striking.

His teeth clashed on the sword. Voldemort pressed upwards, calling strength to his arms. Harry snapped, catching the sword between his teeth and ripping it from Voldemort's grasp. Venom dripped onto the ground burning through the soil. The sword melted into a pitiful heap, useless to Voldemort. He conjured several daggers then and sent them flying.

Harry struck again, catching Voldemort's shoulder as he danced backwards. Stumbling, Voldemort caught himself on the ground and growled. Harry gloated at the torn and bloody robes. The fabric disintegrated where it touched venom, burning Voldemort.

§You'll be dead soon,§ Harry taunted. §Particularly nasty venom isn't it? It burns something fierce.§

--

Persephone stood tall in the field of destruction and broken bodies. Their enemies were dead. Heavy tolls were taken on the combined allied forces. The centaurs were now just a dozen strong. Her Kiss was comprised of herself and her three bodyguards. The rest were in true death. Harry's snakes... well who knew how many he had before the battle. Their slender reptilian forms littered the ground heavily. Their losses were the greatest.

Scuttling clicking noises sounded from the forest. She glanced over at the edge and licked her glistening fangs. The battle it seemed was not quite over. She ran for the woods.

--

A rustling noise broke the silence. Harry glanced toward it as gleeful shouts broke out.

"You did it Harry!" Luna shouted happily as she and Flitwick ran into the road followed by the runespoor Harry had instructed to guard his ward breakers. "The Pretender is dead!"

Flitwick grabbed her by the shoulder, jerking her back. "He's not dead yet."

"Oh Harry!" Hermione breathed coming up behind the duo, all exuberance and

sweetness.

Her hair was frazzled and twigs stuck out at odd angles, she looked drained. Ward breaking could exhaust magical reserves, he had expected that, but not her sudden appearance. The danger was not yet over. Still her proud and beaming face lifted his flagging spirits.

"I knew you could do it!" she laughed clapping her hands. "It's over it's finally over."

Voldemort glanced in disgust at the trio before smirking evilly. §Not dead yet,§ he whispered unpromisingly then slumped completely to the ground.

§Master!§ Logos warned, sensing the air. §Something's not right!§

Harry swiveled his head back and forth tasting the air. It took a minute but he found the trace of evil attached to Voldemort's soul. It was hidden behind the bounty of Hermione's. Harry looked down.

Beautiful brown eyes glowed red.

§LET HER GO!§ Harry roared, thumping his tail on the ground, uprooting trees on either side of the road.

The spiders swarmed then, pouring out of the forest in droves. Luna shrieked as one grabbed her by her leg and ripped her into the air. Flitwick killed several before he too was caught. It took two of them to drag him down. Pinchers gored through the diminutive professor's arms. Harry growled and spat, raining searing venom down on the clicking spiders. They cried out in pain, muttering angrily.

Voldemort stunned Luna and Flitwick with Hermione's wand, ending their moaning, before aiming the wand at Harry. §Revert to your true self. You are not the serpent king, that is my title.§

§LET HER GO!§

"LET HER GO!"

Possessed Hermione glared at the intruder. The spiders scuttled closer. "Daniel Potter. Showing a spine at last, are we?"

§Let her go,§ Harry snarled, swiping at Voldemort, knocking him to the ground.

Voldemort laughed Hermione's laugh, sending it bouncing gaily out in the dark, chilling Harry to the bone. "I will have you, Harry. Surrender. Revert to your weak human body."

"Don't do it Harry!" Daniel shouted, raising his wand on Hermione. He glanced nervously at the encroaching spiders and gulped.

"I will kill her make no mistake about that," Voldemort cackled. "Shall I kill her, Harry? Shall I kill your little wife?"

"Wife?" Daniel questioned confused.

"Don't," Harry said changing.

Voldemort sneered, watching the change as Harry shrunk to normal. "Don't what?"

"Let her go."

"I shall enjoy killing you, Harry."

Harry stood determinedly in front of Daniel. "A willing sacrifice, my body for their lives. Let all of them go. Flitwick and Luna too."

"I think not," Hermione said sweetly, madness in her eyes. "Avada Kedavra!"

Harry fell, struck dead in the center. Daniel screamed as the spiders got him. Voldemort laughed riotously in victory.

°«««°»»»°End Chapter 48°«««°»»»°

Daniel's distraught moan landed on Voldemort's delighted ears as he turned to examine his newest friends. The spiders grappling with the young wizard murmured about fresh tasty food. Daniel's eyes rolled up into the back of his head and fainted.

"My dear friends, I told you I would not fail you. I am the true King of Snakes."

Aragog pushed forward, ancient and blind. His eight eyes pasty white, he clicked his pinchers and rasped a few times before speaking. "Lord Voldemort, we have delivered you from defeat. There are enough bodies on the grave sight to feed my family for many moons. You promised them to us as part of our reward, but it is time for you to make good on your second promise. Give me the basilisk boy."

"I think not," Voldemort said calmly, tossing a glance over his shoulder at the still form of his nemesis. "You have not earned him. He is my prize."

"We saved your pathetic life..." Aragog clicked angrily. "You lied to us, wizard."

"Yes," Voldemort said simply, pushing back bushy brown hair with annoyance. "Now run off and claim your food while I still let you."

"Let us!" Aragog screamed. "You do not let us do anything. We do not obey your will."

"You'll find that you do," Voldemort sneered, using a cutting hex to butcher the hair that kept dropping in front of his eyes. How could the mudblood have lived with it was beyond him.

A spider in the back screamed. Voldemort looked over at the commotion as another spider fell. A female vampire rode into the road on a blinded sacramental. Its eyes were still bleeding, its pinchers and teeth ripping into its comrades in its panic.

"What is this trickery?" Aragog demanded, his voice croaking.

Two more blinded spiders came out from opposite sides ridden by two more vampires. Flaming arrows erupted out of the trees in the

ambush. Voldemort sneered. The centaurs were still fighting it seemed. Spiders fell, emitting high pitched screams that grated on his ears. Voldemort batted away an arrow and sent a killing curse in return.

Occamies dived from the trees, swarming the skies. Voldemort watched them with loathing. Their hissing battle cries mingled with the garbled screams of the spiders. They still fought for the boy. They would learn who their master was even if he had to kill them to prove it.

He was out numbered, this much was true, but Voldemort knew no fear. He was the most powerful being on the planet and these fools would not stop him. He razed the nearest trees, throwing many of the foul halfbreeds into branches and trunks further into the forest. Several dying yelps echoed back to him and Voldemort laughed thriving on the pain.

"Stop this ridiculous fighting," Voldemort declared, sending a killing curse followed by a decapitation curse at the spider vampire duo nearest.

The spider and vampire fell quite dead. He had eyes only for the tiny powerful vampire as he offered allegiance once again. He hated repeating himself.

"We served you once," the female vampire intoned eerily. "But you broke your word. We side with the boy."

"He is dead!"

"And yet you still fear him," she declared, an occamy alighting agilely on her shoulder.

"I fear no one you stupid girl."

§Perhaps you should,§ snarled the snake, baring fangs.

--

Daniel came to looking up through the trees. What was he doing there? Merlin, his head hurt. Then he remembered. Harry dead. Voldemort--spiders!

Fearfully he turned his head and nearly gagged. His two captors lay on either side of him bleeding great white blood onto the ground. The smell was rank and fetid. Their bowels had spilled. Burning smells filled the air and Daniel covered his nose.

Cautiously he sat up and looked around. Some distance ahead of him stood Hermione, who was really You-Know-Who, engaged with a petite woman--no vampire! Daniel gasped in horror. Vampires here? Merlin's hairy balls he was not going to escape. They would find him and drink his blood. There was nobody coming to his rescue now that Harry was dead.

Dumbledore wasn't bloody likely to show up not with that botched asphyxiation curse afflicting him. He licked suddenly dry lips. Morgana's breath! He couldn't even count on Professor Snape! That dirty greasy git. What a load of bat droppings, this was... total bollocks.

He stood carefully and righted his glasses. Scanning the ground, he found his wand under one of the rotting spiders and wrinkled his nose in disgust. Daniel rolled up his sleeves and gingerly reached out for it when the legs of the spider twitched. He jumped.

"Stupid fool," he muttered to himself, steeling up his courage and reached out again to snatch it up.

He sighed in relief at the feel of it in his hand and scurried toward the safety of the forest. He could do this. He was Daniel Bloody Potter--Boy-Who... lacked valor, honor, glory. Boy-Nobody, whose laurels should have gone to Harry. He had defamed his brother because he had been afraid. He was always afraid.

Daniel's shoulders slumped in defeat. The movement skittered his shadow across the trunks of trees, startling him.

"Shit," he cursed. Afraid of his own shadow too.

Well no more.

--

"Persephone was it?" Voldemort hissed, ignoring the occamy. "Your species is known for its immortality but you all hold the same weaknesses."

She raised an eyebrow. "Is this where you threaten sunshine, decapitation, stabbing through the heart, and vow to make a necklace out of my fangs while scattering my ashes across two moving bodies of water?"

"Something like that," he snarled, throwing a flaming hex at her leering visage.

Persephone shrank back, fangs flashing in the night. The occamy leapt into the air with an angry hissing. The hex hit the trees behind her and caught on fire. Orange light blazed brightly as heat erupted at her backside. She eyed the perimeter as the method of escape shrank rapidly.

"Fire," she muttered with disgust. "Is that all you can do, mudblood?"

--

Daniel watched with a combination of awe and fear as You-Know-Who and the vampire fought. Something else was in their midst, but he couldn't tell what it was. It would soon be dead though.

Fire licked up through the branches of the trees and leapt across the road. As it spread, Daniel cast a bubblehead charm to give himself fresh clean air. He drenched himself with water next to fight the heat and crept forward.

He was a Gryffindor--strong, courageous, and brave. He could do this. He could. For Harry. For himself.

--

Voldemort cackled with glee. Possession had never worked out so well. This new body was amazingly young. It was a little out of shape, but so much more sprightly than his own dried out husk. Not that he could return to it. Rigor mortis would be settling by now.

Persephone darted out of the flickering shadows and struck at him. Voldemort fell back, twisting to the side as the supernatural speed of the vampire pushed her past him. He grabbed her arm and jerked her back with all his might. She sailed through the air. Voldemort grunted at the effort.

Strengthening rituals were a priority. This witch was weak.

--

Daniel stood just inside the fire circle, shaking like a leaf. His wand wavered unsteadily before him as he tried to line it up with You-Know-Who. He only had one shot. Only one, while the fucker was distracted by the vampire--

A loud snap followed by high pitched laughter prickled along Daniel's nerves. The vampire fell lifeless to the ground. He watched in horror as the fiendish gleam in You-Know-Who's eyes broke out into full bloom. Gleefully the evil wizard bent down and cut off the vampire's head with a concentrated cutting charm. He seemed to relish his task wholeheartedly.

The black object darting down again and as if it were a mere annoyance, Voldemort batted it aside. The dying yelp of the poor creature sent chills down Daniel's spine. That would be him next.

He gulped, steeling himself. As much as he couldn't stomach the red eyes in the sweet face of his Hermione, he could not stand by and do nothing. A quick prayer to Merlin, that Harry was guiding him.

"DIE YOU BASTARD! AVADA KEDAVRA!" Daniel yelled with conviction, striking out and down with his wand.

Reflexively Voldemort leapt to the side and summoned his wand right out of his hand. He was dead. Daniel knew it. He had failed.

“Impressive,” Voldemort hissed softly, eyes gleaming in triumph, “but not impressive enough. You never were.” He snapped the wand, laughing at Daniel’s wince of pain. “Now that Harry is dead nobody can stop me now. Soon I will rule all.”

Voldemort banished a fallen tree trunk at Daniel, smashing him against the ground. The sound of bone breaking echoed briefly as Daniel fell into unconsciousness. “Why don’t you struggle with that weight, Little Pretender. You failed, the greatest fool of them all.”

Ignoring Daniel, the sudden quiet of the scene, and the stench of the dead bodies, Voldemort glided over to Harry’s crumpled form and smirked triumphantly. “At last, Harry Potter, you are no longer a pain in my side.”

He prodded Harry’s leg with his foot, satisfied at the lack of movement. “Dead, you will be the first forgotten.”

He floated Harry’s body up off the ground. “But first I will use your broken body as my banner. The sight of you will break fighting spirits of old fools.”

Harry opened his eyes. “Over my dead body,” he hissed, staring up into surprised red-tinged chocolate eyes.

Slowly Hermione fell to the ground, the life completely gone from her. Harry groaned, closing glowing green eyes in despair. He fell to the ground as the spell’s magic lost power. Reaching out, Harry gathered her to him and wept bitterly. He had won, but the final price was too high. This above all else he could not pay.

She had made him promise to come back to her, but he had not forced a similar vow from her lips.

A quiet sob caught his attention. Harry looked up, through a haze of tears at a blurry figure pushing himself up off the ground.

“But you died--I saw you!” Daniel blubbered, holding his broken leg and hobbling forward.

Harry's gaze sharpened, the tears vanished. Daniel saw bright glowing green eyes before the world went dark. Harry slipped out of the partial transformation and cradled Hermione's form closer still, pushing soft bushy hair out of her unseeing eyes.

The heat of the fire crackled and burned, wrecking a desolation on the surroundings equal to the desperate anguish of his soul. Torches appeared at the base of the lane. Muggles were coming. Wizards too; if the sounds of apparition pops were anything to go by.

All around voices broke out in cheer. Harry brushed a trembling kiss across Hermione's lips. No one cared that two bodies turned to stone in the end, cold as ice. Or that without her Harry was dead to them as well. For it was over... entirely and completely over.

Someone was shouting at him, Harry didn't hear. He stared blankly down at the last expression Voldemort held; terror. He closed Hermione's eyes, smoothing out her features in an effort to erase the wizard's third possession of her.

--

Much later, when the fires were burned out, the dead bodies of man and creature removed, and the area washed clean by the spellfire of dozens of Ministry witches and wizards on clean-up duty, Harry sat alone and motionless in a private suite at St. Mungo's, staring at his hands.

He was trying and failing to clear his mind of its guilty contemplations. Voldemort was gone and that should have been enough to make him deliriously happy. But he wasn't for Voldemort's death was also Hermione's. By possessing her, Voldemort had hoped to play on Harry's love for her to save himself.

A tear landed on his knuckles. He had killed Oorjit similarly. As cold and heartlessly as that first time, Harry had done it again. Never mind that letting her or Oorjit live meant less than a half-life for the victim.

Voldemort had hoped to exploit the weakness brought on by emotions, feelings, connections to others. Harry discovered in the moment before he opened his eyes that he had as little humanity as

the dark wizard. The snake in him, the king in him, would not let him fall victim to the timeless mistake of letting an enemy go free. If Voldemort had escaped, he would grow stronger. He would come back and try again thinking he could get away with more.

Harry had to be strong. Hopefully, he thought miserably, she understood that. In the hours after the fact he wasn't sure he did... at least not anymore. A hole the size of one of Hagrid's pumpkins gaped in the middle of his chest, fathoms deep. A pressure was building there behind his ribs, growing more agonizing even through his mental state of numbness.

He sent Flitwick and Luna away earlier, not able to bear their worried presences any longer. The great plover was dead and he didn't feel up to discussing it with Luna. And he certainly did not want to rehash the curse of his childhood, which she tended to bring up a little too often.

It was funny, Harry thought idly, looking at his fingernails, how he had told Hermione that he didn't think he had much longer to live. He should have known. One never tempted fate like that.

His legs itched, it felt like something was rubbing him. It dawned on Harry that something was indeed touching him. A swift hot glare downward revealed the runespoor.

§You were suppose to watch her!§ he snarled, jerking his leg back and kicking the snake across the room. §I put you in charge of her safety and you couldn't have fucked up any worse--§

§Sire, let me explain--!§ the middle head began.

§No,§ Harry sneered. §You will not explain. You can not explain it away. She is dead--§

§But sire--!§ the left head interrupted, pushing them forward.

Harry waved his hand and blasted them into the wall, taking satisfaction in the myriad of cracks that occurred. §Excuses. You think platitudes of great grasses and it's for the better will soothe my

rage? She is gone forever because of your ineptitude. You will suffer as I suffer. §

§Please, sire!§ the right head entreated, waving his head wobbly as the mice raced around in circles above him. §We did as you asked, I swear!§

§Lies,§ Harry hissed menacingly. §Lies from you, dreamer? I should have known. You think all day and never do anything. You help no one--§

§You are being unreasonable my lord,§ the left head criticized, sounding stern.

Harry leveled a glare at the left head. §Unreasonable? Unreasonable! How dare you--§

§I dare,§ Logos interrupted, appearing beside the other runespoor, his fangs bared, §Because Oorjit gave me charge to watch over you in case something like this happened.§

Harry fell abruptly silent, staring at the six heads of the two runespoors. §He what?§ he asked flatly.

Logos nodded, his ruffled scales smoothing out. §Oorjit saw the pattern and was aware you might be called upon to make another sacrifice--another payment to get rid of Voldemort. With Serion and Myrtle already dead, having given up their lives for the cause, he knew he might be next. And he knew if he went, it was possible your chosen queen might follow.

§Snakes can not throw off a wizard's possession,§ Ethos reminded gently, curling protectively in front of its brethren. §You know this. It is why you killed Oorjit. Better to die by the hand of our King than to die when all of the life in us has been drained out by that wizard. Possessed, and we can not even claim a half-life. When Voldemort *thought* to possess Hermione we became powerless.§

§It's not fair,§ Harry growled, swiping everything off his end table with a single violent gesture.

§Apep never told us it would be.§

Harry looked at the runespoors and shook his head in defeat. What he wouldn't give to turn back the hands of time to change things.

"Daniel! Harry!" Dumbledore's voice boomed merrily from the help of a sonorous spell. The last person Harry wanted to see walked through the doorway clutching his chest.

Harry glared at the new arrival as Daniel struggled into a sitting position across from him. Several others stormed into the room after Dumbledore, speaking all together. Harry conjured earmuffs and slipped them on over his head. He didn't care to speak to lot of them, the bloody hypocrites.

A few minutes of crying and rejoicing over Daniel's safe return and the congregation turned as one on Harry. He stroked the top of Ethos brow, idly watching his ex-family stare at him. The awkward moment broke when Lily rushed forward.

"Oh, Harry," she gushed trying to hug him, knocking off his earmuffs.

He shrugged her off with a glower to rival Snape's patented sneer. "Don't touch me."

Lily trembled, her lower lip protruding as her eyes welled up with tears. "Harry, dear, your farther and I are so sorry."

Harry flicked his eyes to James before returning to Lily's. "My father is Filius Flitwick, as to you and your husband, you have only ever had the one son. He's sitting over there."

"Harry!" Sirius reprimanded as James strode over to cradle Lily's shaking shoulders. "What is wrong with you? Lily and James are apologizing, be man enough to accept that."

"What did you just say?" Harry growled dangerously, his eyes flashing bright green. "Tell me Black, what have you done to protect everyone from Voldemort. Did you kill your wife, your best friend, or any of your friends? What have you lost, you bastard! Tell me!"

Sirius remained silent, glaring hatefully at Harry.

"Nothing," Harry finished with derision. "You've lost nothing. You've done nothing."

"Harry," Remus said softly, apologetically, his voice a strangled thing. "Please."

"No, Lupin," Harry sneered, turning on him. "Whatever you want to say, I don't wish to hear. You're a coward. All of you. You have lost nothing and I have lost everything. I have to bury my wife. My new wife! Then, I have to go find her parents and let them know that their daughter is gone. Be a man you say? I have to live knowing I did everything to stop him and it still wasn't enough to save her."

"You could have done something different," Daniel spoke up, glowering at Harry. "You didn't have to kill her."

"How else do you through off a possession?" Harry threw back, glaring as well. "Ask Voldemort to free her, pretty please? No, I had no choice." He turned back to Remus and said, "So no, Lupin, I don't forgive them, or you four."

Remus flinched. Lily trembled. James and Sirius stared hard, mouths set into grim hard lines. Dumbledore looked like he wanted to object, but couldn't get enough air.

"You all claimed to be these great light wizards, but the truth is you are all a bunch of narrow-minded cretins who don't deserve to do magic. You all listened to Dumbledore, but what great truth did he speak? He won't tell me for the shame of it."

"Oh, this is entertaining," an oily voice said from the doorway. Everyone turned toward Snape as he skulked into the room. "I brought you something, Harry, but I see you're having a little family reunion. Couldn't get out?"

"It was an ambush," Harry returned, motioning Snape forward. "They don't understand the words, fuck off, so they're still here."

“Get out!” James blustered, glaring daggers at Severus. “You have no business here. We’re discussing private family matters.”

Snape arched an eyebrow. “I see,” he droned softly. “From what I hear, you burned that bridge already, Potter. Political suicide wasn’t it? Got you fired from your cushy job did it not? Malfoy cleaned your clock good, and you need Harry. That is why you’re all here isn’t it?”

“The hell you know,” Sirius growled.

Snape passed a lazy mocking glance over the man behind James. “I know plenty, dog.”

Sirius bristled. “We’re here because we care for Harry.”

“Ha,” Harry mocked.

Snape smirked. “I read the papers,” he said, his smirk growing larger. “Daniel is sick. Permanently damaged from over exposure to the black arts, the Cruciatus mainly, if I recall. You’re going to ask Harry to help Daniel out once more. That is why you are here.”

“I knew there was a reason for their sudden interest,” Harry replied as Sirius shouted, “I’ll get you, you greasy overgrown pompous windbag!”

James sprung forward ready to tear into the potions master. Snape brandished his wand, holding it steady against James’ nose halting him in his tracks. “Oh dear, we are in trouble now, Potter. Call off your little lapdog.”

“DAD!” Daniel shouted, struggling against Lily’s hands holding him in place on the bed.

“Now Severus,” Dumbledore began disapprovingly, coughing loudly.

“LET HIM GO!”

“Not this time Albus. Call off your lapdog.”

“Sirius, back away,” James said, shaking with impotent anger.

"But James--"

"Sirius!"

"I could turn him into stone for you," Harry offered gleefully from his bed.

Snape flicked his gaze over to Harry before returning to James. "Tempting. However, I would rather not brew the bastard another potion that takes two months of effort and time."

"Good point. I'm sure you have better things to do."

"It seems Potter," Snape sneered, "that we are at an impasse."

"I could call on the life debt you owe me. Put your wand down!"

Snape chuckled. "I owe you nothing."

"I saved your life!"

"And I gave yours back to you," Snape returned with narrowed eyes.

James' face paled, then mottled. "No," he whispered horrified.

"You should have died that night," Sirius growled, straining against Remus' hold.

"Sirius!" Remus shouted in dismay, letting go of Sirius and stepping away.

"ENOUGH!" Dumbledore yelled hoarsely, unable to draw enough air, the sonorous charm gone. His shout effectively stopped them in their tracks. They stared back at him owlshly.

"I am deeply sorry, Harry," Dumbledore inserted, his voice insistent, as he rested an aged hand on Sirius' neck, holding him back. "I made an error when I was younger that has cost you greatly. I took the evidence in at a glance and summarily decided something I had no right to decide."

"That's right, you didn't," Harry bit out. "I've been reading up on mind magics. You can hide behind the fact that entering a child's mind to find the truth would forever alter their mind--warping it beyond all recognition. That could explain your blindness then, but the mind is sufficiently settled by age eleven though when our magical core stabilizes. You could have done so then to discover the truth, but you didn't. Over the years you didn't even bother to check Daniel's lies, read him to see if his stories were true. Or me to see if I was telling the truth."

"Ah," Dumbledore said then, interrupting Harry. "Here is where we come to a significant glitch. It is my belief that when Voldemort attacked you and Daniel as children, the magic unleashed that night did more than protect you from the Killing Curse."

"Luna's already told me," Harry retorted. "So save it. I got the gist of the damn thing. Everything has a price. Voldemort wasn't expecting a pure unselfish act, the perfect counter to the evil of a killing curse and the cost of life was not paid that night. Voldemort's horcruxes kept him alive and therefore I became the recipient of a living death. I was invisible, protected from those who did not wish the best for me."

He cut a glance over at James and Lily there before flicking his eyes back to Dumbledore. "But Luna's told me I broke that protection recently with all my anger and with Voldemort unable to power up his end, the magic of the curse unraveled. I'm sure releasing it will have a cost. Everything has a cost, Dumbledore, didn't you know that? I've lost so many friends to this war. Friends nobody will remember for their bravery. They're the unsung heroes."

"Oh, Harry," Lily rushed forward again and tried to wrap Harry in a hug. "I'm so sorry."

Harry pushed her away. "Get off me, you crazy witch! You're not my mother; you've never been my mother; and you'll never be my mother; so don't start pretending to care now!"

"You don't mean that," Lily protested, reaching out to him, her eyes wet with fresh tears. "We love you and you love us. After all you went and saved Daniel--"

Harry gave a bark of laughter and scrambled up and over his mattress to avoid her and James. "I saved Daniel not for you two. And not because secretly deep down inside I still loved him like a brother. I hate him."

"You don't mean that," Dumbledore began.

"Oh, but I do. I saved Daniel for me. To prove that I was over the shit you all put me through."

"Harry--"

Harry pointed a finger at them and sneered, "Attention glory seeking Harry Potter did the right thing when you couldn't be bothered to. I stopped being a Potter long before James disowned me. I'm a Flitwick, and would have been a Flitwick sooner if Dumbledore hadn't taken to poisoning everyone's ears with drivel."

"You all should be ashamed of yourselves," Filius growled from the doorway, pushing past Remus and Sirius. Luna followed hot on his heels. "Leave my son alone. Haven't you done enough to him already? This isn't school, Albus, why are you here?"

"I needed to speak with Harry and Daniel, Filius," Dumbledore said with great calm.

"I certainly hope it is about taking their end of the year exams and not that rubbish I saw in the papers. Harry's been through enough." Filius placed his hands on his hips and glowered, managing to look menacing at barely four feet tall.

Dumbledore turned his attention back to Harry and looked at him with somber eyes. "The family you make for yourself can never replace the joy of being with your true family. If you would just hear them out and accept their apologies you would be so much happier. Surely, you still have the capacity to forgive."

Snape's lips thinned, his nostrils flaring, and Flitwick had his wand out in a flash, pointing it steadfastly at Dumbledore. But neither of their reactions compared with Harry's anger.

"You have the audacity to come in here and tell me that I should be accepting your apologies and your condolences," he hissed, his eyes glowing. "But it was the magic, Harry, you whine. So what? Others could see through it. That means you were either too weak or chose not to! Which is it?"

Harry's magic swelled in the room choking the air. Daniel, and the others gasped at the tingling rush of power. Luna stood unaffected, her intense blue eyes pinning Dumbledore in place.

"And you, Dumbledore," Harry vowed, "I promise the world will know the full extent of your actions. I won in spite of you. So go suck a lemon because I refuse to let you cry hopping pot and Beedle your way out of this one."

"Har--ack," Dumbledore began only to find himself choking on air and on Harry's power.

Harry sneered. "Have you ever considered the cost for the things you've done? Life's so much easier when you got someone to blame. It is too bad then that you can only blame yourselves. Now get out!"

With a push of magic Harry sent the lot of them flying out of the room. Even Dumbledore could not fight the wave of hatred Harry flung at them. When the last one fell down in the corridor outside the room, Harry took great satisfaction with slamming the door shut and locking it.

"Bloody hell," Daniel whispered in fear from his bed.

Harry's eyes flicked over to him and Daniel visibly shrank back against his pillows. Harry smirked.

"That was satisfying," Snape announced, his usual scowl replaced by a smile, that was even more terrifying.

"You didn't make them suffer enough," Flitwick countered, approaching Harry's bedside.

"Perhaps not, father," Harry sighed, rubbing one of the runespoors' heads, seeking comfort. "But they just weren't worth it."

Luna gazed narrowed in Daniel's direction. "No, not worth it," she agreed, sounding more somber then she had ever sounded before.

Filius enveloped him in a hug, pulling him close. "I know, son. But I would have liked to have seen it nonetheless."

--

"Hello, Harry," Luna whispered quietly, waking Harry up from disturbing dreams.

She handed him his glasses, which he gratefully put on. "What is it Luna? I didn't realize that visiting hours were still open."

"Budge over," she demanded, settling onto the tiny hospital bed with him. He scooted. "I have to tell you something."

Harry blinked sleepily, stifling a yawn. "Tell me what?"

"The wind sprites told me that time is changing. There are things you still have to do and things to do you've already done."

"That doesn't make any sense, Luna," he told her.

She turned her pale blue eyes on him. "I could send you into this blind, but your happiness means more to me, however. So please listen, it is important."

Harry's gaze turned serious as he steadied it on her. "I'm listening."

"You're about to get your secret wish," she informed him. "You must remember who you are, what you are."

"How can I not?"

"Sh..." she hushed. "The trapped hummingbird will go free. The chance to become again is ever near. A choice is to be made. The right choice will give you great happiness - the other only mild contentment. Making no choice will curse you worse than before."

"Luna," Harry murmured, shaking his head. "The hummingbird will go free? What on earth does that mean?"

"I love you, Harry," she confessed. "And not as a friend, so I pray you'll make the right choice."

"Do you know what it is?" he asked.

"Don't forget me," she whispered then, leaning forward and kissing him lightly on the mouth. "Remember I love you."

"Luna..."

"I have to go," she said hastily, scrambling backwards and running out of the room.

He saw tears on her cheeks and called out, confused. She didn't respond. Harry frowned at her retreating back, until he couldn't see her out of the open doorway. She didn't return again during the rest of his stay in the hospital.

--

Harry checked out of the hospital a week later. He managed to avoid Dumbledore's posse by switching rooms after they'd all left the first time. He had noted Daniel's sour expression and had smiled smugly to himself. It was about time Daniel was all but ignored in a room.

He gathered his meager possessions and shooed the runespoors away. It was time to check out and go home. Filius was going to be down in the lobby waiting for him and then they would go. He hoped Luna was there, he needed to speak with her, but she'd been avoiding him and his letters, much to Hedwig's distress and his own.

When he left this place he would figure out his life from there, what was left of it that was. He owed Persephone's kiss to try to change the vampire laws in Britain. Perhaps he would be a politician, use his newly acquired fame for some good. He certainly wasn't going to be an auror. Too much had been taken out of him fighting Voldemort, why would he want to go after his followers? Let others handle that.

He had Luna's warning to consider; hummingbirds and plovers, honestly. Then there was the matter of that vampire prophecy. He had to lead the snakes into greatness. How on Apep's green earth

was he going to accomplish that? The challenge there alone would help him keep his mind off of his losses. There would be too much to do to brood over, or at least that is what he hoped.

He exchanged greetings with a Healer in the corridor and continued down toward the elevators. The lift came almost immediately, the doors sliding noiselessly open accompanied by the mechanical female voice heralding the floor. Harry looked up briefly noting the two Healers inside before stepping in.

“Lobby please,” he intoned and the one nearest the panel pushed the button.

The doors slid shut as Harry stuck his hands into his pockets and took a deep breath. The Healers looked in askance at him but he shook his head at them. The lift opened on the following two floors to let others in and out. By the fifth floor he was alone in the lift and he breathed a sigh of relief.

He didn’t want to be around strangers. Their shallow regard and open remarks were too much for him to handle. Perhaps that political route was not for him after all if he couldn’t sweat the small stuff.

“Level Four: Spell Damage Ward for those unliftable jinxes, hexes, and incorrectly applied charms.”

“Harry,” came a frosty voice.

Oh great, Harry thought as he glanced up into identical green eyes. “Daniel.”

“Leaving are we? Budge over.”

Harry moved to allow Daniel entrance, saying nothing as the doors closed again.

“Why’d you do it?” Daniel asked after a moment’s silence.

Harry’s jaw clenched. “Do what?” he asked tersely. He didn’t need this now.

“Kill her.”

Harry didn't have to ask who her was, but he didn't respond to the bait. He was not going into Hermione's death with Daniel.

They past level three before Daniel spoke up again. “I couldn't have killed her for anything.”

That was not what the runespoors had told him. Harry narrowed his eyes in distaste. “Hmm.”

“Not even for You-Know-Who.”

“Voldemort,” Harry countered, unable to hold in his disgust, his upper lip curling. “That's why you failed in the end. I did what I had to.”

“What... kill Hermione?”

“You think I wanted to kill my new wife?” Harry growled.

Daniel sneered, “I think you got your revenge in spite of everything.”

“How dare you--” Harry hissed, slamming Daniel into the side of the elevator, locking his elbow underneath his jaw. “She was possessed. Do you understand what that means?”

“That you were a coward,” Daniel returned defiantly, shoving Harry off of him. “I know you never really loved her. She wouldn't have wanted to die.”

“She wouldn't have wanted staying possessed either.”

“But you didn't look for options!”

“There wasn't time for options,” Harry ground out, gnashing his teeth together. “My sources told me you threw a killing curse at her back. It seems to me like you came to the same conclusion that I did.”

“Yes,” Daniel acknowledged casually, shaking out the collar of his robes. “But I knew it wasn't going to work. Voldemort...”

“Congratulations,” Harry bit out, scowling. “You can join the big boys now.”

“Voldemort,” Daniel continued unaffected, “would not fall to a simple thing like a killing curse. There were options. Had you had a time turner, for instance, things might have gone differently.”

Harry stared at Daniel and saw red. “And you thought of this when? When there was still time to go back? I know you were delivered the mandagora potion by the Healers within six hours, Daniel. There would have been plenty of time to save her if you had just opened your mouth.”

Daniel smirked. The lift opened.

“Level One: Creature-Induced Injuries including bites, stings, burns, embedded spiders, etc.”

“Long enough to plan this,” chortled a voice right outside the lift holding a wand.

Harry stared at his brother’s doppelganger. “What are you doing?”

“Avenging Hermione,” the second Daniel said casually as the original boxed Harry inside the lift. “She was always supposed to be mine you know.”

“No, I don’t know,” he sneered, sneaking a hand into his robes.

“Like mum and dad, she and I were supposed to be together. Dumbledore promised.”

Harry nodded nonchalantly, outwardly calm. “But he didn’t deliver, did he?”

“No, he did not.”

“Keep your hands where I can see them, Harry,” the original tut-tutted.

Harry slowly eased his hand out of his pocket, clutching his wand, tense and ready. However his wand must have shown because

Daniel hurled a hex at him, throwing him backwards. A disarming charm and another bludgeoner slammed into him and he lost his wand. Harry hissed in Parseltongue only to have it countered. That shouldn't be possible.

"No, brother," Daniel admonished. "No snake language for you."

"How?" shifting slightly, transforming his eyes.

"I did a little research since I woke up. Spiders if you recall are blood enemies with Basilisks. I've got your number, Harry. You can't escape."

Harry didn't get the chance to complete the transformation as the green of the killing curse washed over him. His lifeless body slumped down. Daniel snapped the holly wand in his hands and tossed them carelessly over his brother's dead body before his younger self pulled out Lavender's time turner from Professor Vector's Arithmancy project.

"See you in an hour," he said cheekily to himself before fading away.

--

"Platform 9 ¾?" Harry grouched, rubbing his stinging eyes. "Why the hell am I at the bloody train station?"

"I can answer that one, young Harry," said a blonde woman with giant blue eyes wearing yellow bumblebee robes.

"And you are?"

"Luna's mother. You can think of me as Sacharissa."

"That explains the resemblance, but not how Luna got a normal name," he muttered, dropping his hand. "So why am I here then?"

Sacharissa laughed. "You're dead. I am too for that matter. This is the waiting station... purgatory."

"Oh, that makes sense," Harry grumbled recalling the bright green light Daniel had hit him with. He glanced around looking at the others milling about. "How do we leave?"

"I can leave when Xenophilius meets me here. You however could leave now."

Harry looked up, anxious. "Because Hermione's here?"

Sacharissa shook her head. "She's gone forward already."

"She didn't wait for me?" Harry asked, hurt.

"Some of us have no choice. You do. You can go back or forward."

"Go back? As in a ghost?"

She pinned him with her big blue eyes. "No, pumpkin. I meant you can live again."

"Rebirth? Or reincarnation?" Harry asked with a frown. "Wait--would I be a snake or something?"

"No, no. Your sacrifices to the war were seen as an over abundance. Fate, for the lack of a better word, is allowing you to travel back in time to your fourth year should you wish to try to change things for the better. There are things too, that Fate still wishes you to do, hummingbird, but you've died so you can not be forced into anything. You've earned your reprieve."

"I could save them," Harry said slowly.

"Yes, you could certainly try," Sacharissa replied gently, folding her hands in front of her.

"Even Hermione?"

"All the unsung heroes of the war."

Harry spared half a second to decide and nodded his head firmly. "I'll do it."

“Hold on a second there soldier,” Sacharissa cautioned. “The magic to send you back has a price.”

Harry looked at her wearily and sunk down onto one of the benches. “What is it?”

“Simply put. Half of your memories from year four and on will remain your own. The other half will go to Voldemort.”

“Half to Voldemort! Are you insane?”

“It’s the cost of keeping things balanced. This way you don’t hold more knowledge of the future than Voldemort. Whatever you don’t know, he does.”

Harry eyed her narrowly. “I don’t suppose I could choose which memories I retained then?”

“Fraid not.”

“What about my skills?”

“They would still be yours, you just might forget you have them or how to use them.”

“Fate’s chosen, you say?” Harry grumbled, raking a hand through his hair.

Luna’s mum smiled serenely. “More like her bitch. So do you still want to go back?”

“Oh bloody hell,” Harry cursed.

Sarchissa laughed. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

White light surrounded Harry until he had to close his eyes from the intensity.

--

Harry opened his eyes to bright sunshine and groaned, covering his face with his arm. He’d done it. He was alive again. If it worked like it

was supposed to then he was back in time. Sometime around the summer before year four, which meant he was either thirteen or fourteen.

He tried recalling his adoptive father's face and came up with James' visage. That wasn't right. He remembered a girl telling him they loved him, but drew a blank when it came to her name or face. He remembered that he could use Parseltongue magic and defeated Voldemort with his animagus form's deadly gaze, but he couldn't recall how to transform or worse yet any of the locations for Voldemort's many Horcruxes, or how to defeat them.

Which meant Voldemort knew those things... but knowing the locations for the Horcruxes was something he should know already. Same with how to defeat them or at least Harry believed so. No harm there at least.

This was so bloody confusing. And if he thought it was confusing... Harry stifled a laugh, imagining Voldemort's face as the random knowledge from Harry's version of the future suddenly coming to him. Snake face's reaction would certainly have been hilarious to witness.

If only her advice came with instructions. If only he could remember who her was. Harry rubbed his temples and heaved a beleaguered sigh. Why did he always choose to be an idiot? He was a bloody Ravenclaw after all, he should be smarter than that--or at least learn from his mistakes.

§Flat face apes,§ hissed a disgruntled voice beside him, §always trampling on the little guys.§

Harry blinked and tilted his head. There half hidden in the grass was a tiny garden snake staring beadily at him.

§Serion?§ Harry breathed in disbelief.

The snake tipped its head, and said, §I do not recall meeting a speaker of the snake language before. How is it you know my name?§

Harry pushed up on his elbow and grinned at the sight of his suspicious familiar and long time friend. §That is because I am your King.§

°«««°»»»°The End°«««°»»»°